

You'll Like Me When I'm Dead

Jade-Max

Star Wars

Complete



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Summary

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Description:

Post RoTS AU - Dark Drama & Dark Romance: Suit-less Vader has learned that Padmé has survived and is determined to install her in her rightful place by side... Minor P/OC & V/A pairing at the beginning - primary V/P pairing. Complete.

Opening Scroll

Disclaimer: It's George's sandbox, I'm simply destroying the sandcastles

Title: You'll Like Me When I'm Dead

Author: JadeMax

Characters: Darth Vader, Padmé Skywalker, Asajj Ventress

Genre: Dark Drama, Angst, Dark Romance

Era: Post RotS

Summary: Suit-less Vader has learned that Padmé has survived and is determined to install her in her rightful place by side...

Notes: This plot bunny was given to me by **Daenarraah**, and I can't thank her enough for the ideas; she has been and continues to be a major influence in the development of this story to ensure that she gets what she wants as the plot bunny is something of a monster and quite a rabid one at that!

Note 2: This is not a Vader redemption fic. If you're looking for one, this is not the place for you.

You'll Like Me When I'm Dead

Introduction

It's been twenty months since the creation of the Empire and the revelation of Palpatine's new apprentice — the once charismatic Hero With No Fear. Fallen from light, Anakin Skywalker has embraced the very darkness he fought to destroy. In full command of his formidable abilities, and a face once known as a sign of hope, he has become a harbinger of death.

Padmé Naberrie Skywalker, having survived the birth of her twins but, having fallen into a coma immediately thereafter, has spent the months since her awakening searching for them. Disillusioned and embittered by the league of 2000's lack of action and their reluctance to assist her in her search for her children, she's turned her back on people she once considered her friends. On her own, and teamed up with unlikely allies, Padmé has taken up a campaign of her own against the Empire.

Her husband, once Anakin Skywalker and now known only as Darth Vader, continues his quest against the Jedi and brings her wrath down upon himself. Taking it upon herself to make his life difficult, Padmé has made it her life's purpose to make him pay for the suffering and death he's visited upon the galaxy.

Vader, while unknowingly being hunted by his wife, has been given orders by the Emperor that Asajj Ventress, the Force adept once apprenticed to Count Dooku, has been captured. Vader has been dispatched to eliminate her once and for all. But he has plans of his own with regards to the Force adept, for rumors of his wife's survival have filtered to the Dark Lord and he's shifted his focus and vowed to bring Padmé back to his side to take her rightful place as his consort...

Month Twenty, Day 4 PEF

Chapter 1

ZJ7 Mining Platform, Kuati Sector — Month Twenty, Day Four Post Empire Formation (PEF)

Ice and fire.

Steam.

The planet was little more than a ball of super heated gas with two poles of opposite temperatures and several mining platforms to harvest the mineral rich atmosphere. The name, ZJ7, was more a designation than a name, indicating its importance on the galactic scale. On the edge of the Kuati sector, ZJ7 was home to no indigenous life and held no promise for terraforming. It was a pitiful planet, a desolate planet and one Darth Vader had never had any intention of ever visiting.

He shouldn't have been so surprised to find her here.

Gloved hands were folded loosely at the small of his back as he stared out at the swirling gray mists that represented what passed for a view in the main room of the only habitable mining platform. It was a room he'd... *acquired* from the forthcoming citizen. The man had been a fool to deny him and a suitable replacement would be found before they departed orbit.

One finger absently tapped on the back of the opposite hand as the silence of the platform, contrasted by the ultrasonic rumble of the engines he could feel in the soles of his boots, seeped into his mind.

Silence.

Complete and utter silence was such a rare and beautiful thing. It allowed one to examine one's decisions, to plot a course and determine a correct course of action. It allowed for clarity of thought and vision, and the chance to mentally regroup when faced with a choice of some magnitude.

The finger tapped again — and this was a choice of some magnitude.

On one hand was his Master, the Emperor — a man he hated more than any other being in the galaxy — who had given him an order. On the other hand was the possibility of the ultimate personal gain. Disobeying this one command for the chance and obtaining the one thing that he desired most in the entire Galaxy. The one thing that had slipped through his grasp when he'd had the chance to keep it. The one thing he would risk his life, his position, his very career for. The one thing that completed him above all others and gave him purpose not derived from hatred; his wife — Padmé Skywalker.

She'd slipped through his fingers, stolen by his old mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and his child had slipped away with her.

He'd been told she was dead. He'd mourned her, grieved for her and carried her in the corner of his heart untouched by darkness like a beacon. A beacon for what he didn't know, but a beacon none the less. Her death had driven him to make the Jedi pay for that crime alone.

And now, when things were starting to prove fruitful, she'd reappeared. She'd stepped out of his dreams and into his private psyche like a taunt, daring him to come after her. He'd rejoiced, thinking she would come to him, but she hadn't. She'd ignored his overtures completely.

Fingers clenched as suppressed rage was simmered and harnessed for the upcoming confrontation. No one, not even his wife, could be allowed to refuse a summons by the Dark Lord of the Sith.

A hissing sound of the doors opening brought his attention back to the present. The humming of the special binders echoing through the room, unnaturally loud even over the firm steps of his personal guards.

"The prisoner, my Lord."

"Thank you, Captain. Did you disarm her as asked?"

The Captain stepped forward and placed the weapons on the ledge of the viewport, "She was armed only with these."

"Leave us, Captain."

"Yes, my Lord."

The sound of fabric rustling indicated the officer's bow, a move reflected in the viewport's surface, before departing. Vader focused his attention through that reflection on the creature who'd been brought before him in binders. The door opened and closed behind the officer, leaving Vader and his prisoner alone.

The lighting was poor, but the pale cast to his prisoner's skin shone like a light in the darkness, giving him a full view of her insolent visage even as it kept his own cloaked in mystery. His lips twisted. Excellent; she wouldn't recognize him.

"Traitor."

She stiffened, her shoulder squaring back as her dark eyes flashed fire towards his back. Good. She wasn't broken, simply subdued. Force-suppressing binders did that to an adept.

"Did you know that's what they're calling you in the Emperor's court now?"

She said nothing, waiting; and he knew she was waiting for him to turn so she could spit in his face. A face she hadn't seen in a long time and one she wouldn't likely be happy to see again. In fact, he was counting on it.

He kept his back to her, tapping his finger against his glove again. "I've been ordered to eliminate you, Asajj Ventress; you've become something of a liability to the Emperor."

“Then why wait, errand boy?”

Vader’s lips thinned, but he kept his tone pleasant. “I have a further use for you, one that you will enjoy far more than your execution. Of course, if you prefer to die, that can also be arranged.”

Her head tilted suspiciously, but he had her attention. Her words hissed from between clenched teeth, “I’m listening.”

“You have proven to be reckless and impulsive but ruthless. Your skills are still lacking, likely never completed since the demise of your Master, and your swordsmanship is child’s play. Against a truly powerful Jedi opponent you would never come out alive.”

“I’m not here to listen to your insults, little man!”

“You will listen,” his voice dropped to a deadly almost-whisper, “because it is *my* wish. I am the hand that holds your life. You live or die at my whim.”

“Then make your point!”

“My point is this; I can train you. You have skills in espionage and hunting that I require. In exchange you will become my pupil and I will let you live.”

She spat on the floor somewhere behind him. “I could never take the teachings of someone who had once been all that I despise. A traitor who turned on his own people because he wanted something that was beyond his reach only to become my *ally*.” The way she said it made it sound like an insult.

He turned finally, a sinister smile splaying across his lips, a gleam in his eyes that had warned many an opponent they had met their end. “I chose the winning side from the start, Asajj. Unlike you, I was never a separatist; in fact, I’m the one who brought about their downfall. They pleaded for their lives, begging like undisciplined children as I meted out the very justice they sought to impose on others. The temple younglings died with more dignity.”

Asajj strained against her binders, struggling to break free, a murderous intent in her eyes. “You betrayed everything you ever cared for Skywalker and you were a Jedi before you ever became Sith! You don’t deserve the mantle of Sith Lord; you’re little more than the puppet of a man who’s vision happens to include your continued existence.”

“I have a purpose; you have a hand to mouth survival.”

“You ruined my life!” She practically screamed the words.

“No, *you* ruined your life — by choosing to run and hide instead of facing the consequences of your choice. Dare you face them now, like the Sith you claim to be?”

“Release me and I’ll show you what it is to be Sith!”

Her binders dropped to the ground as Vader touched the remote at his wrist, taking two steps back from her lightsabers, and crossing his arms over his chest. “I’m waiting.”

Asajj exploded into motion, the lightsabers leaping from the ledge to land in her outstretched palms and ignite immediately. She screamed at him incoherently. Drawing on her

rage to fuel her style, she drove straight at Vader. Both lightsabers, point in, diving straight for his heart.

Vader didn't so much as twitch as his single red blade snapped to life to deflect the blows easily. He paired calmly, a flicker of fire in his eyes the only sign he was involved at all as Asajj rained blow upon blow down on him.

She twirled about him like a top, hacking from all angles, diving in with her blades from opposite sides. "Passivity is a trait for weaklings, Skywalker! Fight me!"

"When you begin to fight, let me know and I'll oblige you."

She shrieked, coming in with a double attack that would have caught most opponents off guard.

But Vader wasn't most opponents. He continued to parry her blows easily, his calm response infuriating her more than his taunts from before. He remained focused as she expended her energy.

Continuously.

Relentlessly.

Tirelessly.

"Do you feel that lethargy, Asajj?" Vader met up an upsweep before twisting his blade to lock her second one near their center. "That's weakness. That's failure. That's the reason why the Emperor wants you dead."

She struck again, leaping upwards and coming down with a double bladed chop that he simply side stepped to avoid. Her sabers moved up, then down, continuing to work his defense but getting nowhere.

Tired of the game, he countered suddenly, sending one of her blades wide and then the other in the opposite direction. Ducking inside her range with ease, he lashed out with his foot, catching her in the stomach and sending her flying back into the wall.

Asajj, to her credit, kept her feet, staggering as she did. Her blades remained at the ready as he closed in again, taking the initiative. She dodged out of the way, barely avoiding the vicious swipe at her neck. Rolling, she'd barely made her feet when he was on her again.

Vader's crimson blade dived in, stopping just short of her breast a heartbeat before her lightsabers twisted upwards and out, throwing off the attack.

But the knowledge that he could have killed her in that moment was reflected in her eyes. They narrowed, burning with an intense hatred and denial that made his smile become all the more sinister. His lightsaber struck quickly, leaving behind a shower of sparks as it slid up her blade and threw it backwards. A twist of his wrist sent it flying. Her remaining blade came up, a flash of light that sizzled towards his head.

He ducked, twirling once before slamming his leg into both of hers and sending her crashing into the ground. She didn't roll, bringing her lightsaber to bear as she parried the blade driving towards her neck.

A moment before the blades connected, Vader reversed the stroke, the blade dipping down to sizzle for the briefest of moments against her shoulder.

Asajj screamed; denial and pain mingling in her voice as she threw off his attack and rolled to her feet. Vader anticipated her move, blocking her in with impossibly fast strikes. She parried, getting a nick on the arm for her trouble, only to find his blade was everywhere and nowhere at once. She couldn't keep up.

She dove upwards, spinning into the air to slash at him as she fought to gain ground and catch her breath.

Bolts of blue-white lightning struck her as her toes touched the ground, propelling her backwards towards the viewport. She dropped her lightsaber as her muscles convulsed, the electrical charges playing havoc with her nervous system. She dropped to the floor, her fingers clutching the ledge of the viewport for support only to find no purchase as she slid to the ground.

Her screams mingled with the crackle of electricity for long moments before he dropped his hand. Vader shut off his lightsaber, taking the time to hook it to his belt as he strode towards where she lay limply against the wall. Kneeling, he reached out to grab her chin in one hand and he saw himself reflected in her eyes; could see the hatred she bore him, and he smiled a charming smile. "The Emperor has asked me to kill you, Asajj. I have chosen to spare your life — for now."

"I'll never help you, Skywalker."

He backhanded her casually before grabbing her chin in a brutal grip once more. "Has your personal quest against the Jedi been going so well you'd turn me down without hearing what I offer?"

She could do little more than stare at him as her muscles refused to obey her commands. She was beaten. Not even the Force answered her call; not with such a powerful presence in such close proximity and her own abilities practically nullified by the casual throwing of a few Sith lightning bolts.

Vader continued, taking her silence for acquiescence, able to read her expression far more easily than she wanted. "I intend to keep you alive, Asajj. You see, you have certain skills that will be very useful to me. Your hatred for the Jedi, your desire to see their downfall and the downfall of those who would associate with them are key. I have three problems, all of which you can help me with."

His grip eased somewhat, though his gaze remained hard and steady. "You will help me track down and identify the traitors to the Empire, these so called Alliance members. You will help me stop this Jedi hunter, the one who warns Jedi *and* you help me locate Padmé."

Her lips finally answered her call to respond, the muscles twitching even as she forced her voice to remain steady. It was a small victory — the only one she could claim. "At what price?"

His eyes narrowed for a moment — had she hesitated just a fraction before replying? "Whatever price I choose. To start, I'll let you live."

"I'd rather die than help you."

“There are worse things than death.” He ducked his head so they were almost nose to nose, and eye to eye. She attempted to look away, as if knowing what she’d see in his gaze and Vader grasped her face in a brutal grip, crushing her cheeks as he forced her to remain still.

His voice was a low, menacing whisper when he continued. “And there are things that will make you wish for death before I am through with you. I’m not one to throw away assets, Ventress; but either way I will get what I want.”

The momentary turmoil in her gaze was as rewarding as watching it be swept away by reluctant acceptance. Asajj nodded once and his grip released immediately.

He rose to his feet, giving her room, a pleased smile on his face as he extended his hands. Her lightsabers leapt from the floor where they’d fallen. “Excellent. A word of caution, before you leave.”

Asajj regarded him warily as she hauled herself to her feet with the help of the viewport ledge.

“Double cross me and you’ll wish I’d killed you today.”

She nodded, anger flaring to life in her eyes for a brief moment only to be subdued quickly. “Of course, Master.”

Vader reached out and clipped the lightsabers back to her belt with a flick of his wrists. He offered no support, and she truly expected none. On shaky legs, she turned and left, stumbling in a humiliating fashion as she reached the door.

His lips twisted into a smirk as she disappeared. Asajj would serve her purpose until his own had been achieved. Once she’d outlived her usefulness, he’d consider fulfilling the Emperor’s orders. Until that time came, she would prove a useful distraction.

Month Twenty, Day 6 PEF

Author's Note : there is a posting schedule for this fic — it will be updated on the 1st and 16th of every month (or near there) until it's finished being written. Upon completion, the updates will become more frequent. As this is a *collaboration* it requires something more in the way of care before it's satisfactory to both parties. Thanks in advance for your understanding.

Chapter 2

Padmé's Hidden Base — Month Twenty, Day Six PEF

"If I dig any deeper, I'll trigger the security system. You're the one who said we couldn't be noticed, remember?"

Slender fingers reached up to rub stress lines across a weary brow as coffee brown eyes closed against the strain. She'd been up for thirty hours straight waiting for word from her partner and still nothing.

"Padmé?"

She dropped her hand and managed a weak smile. "I'm just worried, Max. You're right of course; we can't risk being detected."

"You've been pushing yourself awful hard lately; don't you think we could give it a rest for a few days?"

"And let him win? Let him have his way, to continue slaughtering people for wanting nothing more than the very freedoms he stole?"

"This quest of yours is going to kill you, you know that right?"

Her lips twitched but there was no humor behind it. "Unless I can find my children, what's the point?"

Max regarded her silently for a long minute, his angular face morose as he shook his head and turned back to his work. His fingers flew confidently over the keypad as he went back to his assignment. Padmé's finger slid over the back of his chair as she hung over his shoulder, watching as her fingers toyed absently with the whips of hair that tickled the nape of his neck. Information scrolled by as Max sliced into the personal database of Darth Vader searching for the names of the Jedi he was currently hunting and indications they'd been found.

"There." Padmé jabbed her finger at the screen and the information stopped scrolling. A few taps on the keys and the list came into pull focus. Her fingers tightened, whitening on the back of the chair. Twenty seven names glared at her, just over half of them in red.

Vader had been busy.

Max downloaded the copy of the list, carefully erasing his cyber footprints behind him before delving into the list of names and bringing up several along with their current known locations. The information was copied carefully and cross referenced with whatever information on those names they currently had. He didn't touch the red listed names; the dead needed no favors.

Padmé slipped the disk Max handed her into one pocket of her jacket — she'd examine it later — and strode to what she considered her office several doors down. She checked her coded message box one more time, leaning against the panel and not daring to sit. If she did, she might succumb to exhaustion and she had to know. Her contact was late, so late that Padmé was starting to wonder if something horrible had happened. Something—

The door hissed open, bringing her head around as her hand dropped to the ever-present blaster on her hip. It fell away as the pale figure, over a day late, strode confidently into her office.

“You're late, Asajj.”

“I was detained.”

“Anything I should know about?”

Asajj settled herself comfortably into the chair across from Padmé's desk, her booted feet coming to rest on the table top. “I was delayed, Padmé, nothing more.”

Padmé examined the woman before her for a moment before accepting her at her word. “Must have been some delay.”

“I ran into some old friends.” Asajj flicked her hand towards the carafe on Padmé's desk and telekinetically poured herself a glass of water. The carafe paused before pouring a second glass for her hostess. The bottom barely tinkled before both glasses lifted into the air and one flew gracefully towards Padmé, the other coming to rest in Asajj's outstretched palm.

Padmé arched her eyebrows. “You've been practicing.”

“And you look like hell.” Asajj regarded her partner critically. “Have you slept at all?”

“I was worried about you.” Padmé pulled the glass from the air with a nod of thanks. “I don't have many Force sensitive allies you know.”

“You don't have any other than me, you mean.” Asajj took a sip of her drink, lounging in her chair, but there was a stiffness to her posture Padmé picked up on.

“Are you sure you're alright? You look like you've seen some action.”

Asajj winced. “Nothing I couldn't handle. What's our next target?”

“Were you able to destroy the mining operation on ZJ7?”

Asajj shook her head; the motion obviously reluctant for Padmé knew her friend hated to fail. “That's where things got... complicated.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not particularly.” Asajj’s retort was calm. “I came out of it alive; that’s enough. Now; what’s our next target?”

Padmé bent over her desk, keying in a special sequence and bringing up a map of the Galaxy. The Empire’s systems were red, the Alliance’s known sympathizers in blue; the map was almost completely crimson. She tapped a couple more keys, zeroing in on a space station orbiting the world of Kashyyyk. “Here. This is a top secret, high tech facility where they’re using Wookiee slaves to research, develop and test experimental weapons.”

The glitter in Asajj’s eye told Padmé she’d chosen well; the Force adept hated the Empire almost as much as she did. Asajj’s tone was speculative. “What kind of deployment are we talking?”

Padmé keyed another sequence, bringing up the total specifications for the base; Max was an investment she had yet to regret — in more ways than one. “It has a large garrison, but feeding a computer virus into the software should neutralize them temporarily. The idea is to use what’s already on the station to create a diversion so we can free the Wookiees and let them take it from there.”

“It won’t bring Vader in; a little rebellion is beyond his notice.”

“I know.” Padmé’s tone became hard. “This is the bait.”

The image of a slender female appeared with another tap of the keys, her information scrolling along side. “Shar Juntek, Jedi Knight and fugitive, has been sighted in the sector. She has a penchant for Wookies and wields a blue lightsaber.” Padmé looked pointedly at where Asajj’s weapons dangled easily from her belt. “Give you a cloak and a head cover and you’ll pass for Shar. She’s on Vader’s list, Asajj. If you can draw him in and give me an opening, I can take the shot that will end this war once and for all. Without Vader to enforce his orders, the Emperor won’t be able to control the Galaxy and it will eventually result in civil war.”

“And this time would be different from the last two times?” Asajj’s look was pointed and haughty; she plainly didn’t believe her ally. “You had the perfect bead on Vader the last time and *didn’t* pull the trigger. Why should this time be any different?”

Padmé slammed her hands down on the table with a bang, her eyes flashing. “Because I hate him! That... that *thing* killed my husband, destroyed whatever hope I had to a normal, peaceful life and is directly responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent beings! He deserves to rot in a shallow grave!”

Asajj’s lips tilted into an amused smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “So you keep saying. I wonder, Padmé, if you want to kill him as much as you say you do.”

Bitterness seeped into Padmé’s expression. “You’ve suffered at the hands of injustice, Asajj. Can you honestly tell me that in my position you wouldn’t want to see him dead? That every fiber of your being wouldn’t be crying out to destroy the mockery he’s made of your life? He stole everything from me — from my life to my heart — and I’ll never forgive him for it.”

Their eyes met, the pain Padmé used as a daily source of strength shining in her eyes.

A pale hand placed the glass on the desk as Asajj rose to her feet. “I won’t play Shar for you, Padmé, but I will help you eliminate the base. If your intelligence is as good as it seems its destruction would set them back a decade in research.” Her lips twisted. “I suggest we locate Shar and eliminate her ourselves if we want to deprive Vader of his prize.”

Padmé cocked her head at Asajj. The Force adept didn’t like Jedi, in fact had something of a personal vendetta against them, but Padmé wasn’t about to condone killing the very people who were their best chance at eliminating Vader — if they could be brought together to work collectively. Asajj didn’t need to know that just yet, however. She nodded, as if in agreement with the plan. “I’ll set Max to locating her immediately; you figure out how we’re going to destroy that research station without killing all the Wookiees.”

“They’re only Wookiees.”

“They’re slaves and enemies of the Empire which makes them valuable assets; and they’ve been involved in research projects we might be able to use against them.”

Asajj conceded the point with a tilt of her head.

Padmé pulled the diagram of the facility up once more and copied it to a data disk. She slid it across the desk to Asajj. “We had forty eight hours from the time I received this to make it work.”

“And now?”

“Eighteen. Whatever plan you’re going to come up with, you’d better make it a good one.”

“Excellent,” Asajj’s smile was sadistically pleased as she rubbed her hands together. “I work better under pressure. I’ll see you in eighteen hours.”

She turned to leave and Padmé couldn’t resist one last taunt. “And Asajj?”

The Force adept paused, tilting her head to show she was listening.

“Try to avoid any more run-ins with old friends will you? They play havoc with my schedule.” Padmé grinned as Asajj’s chuckle followed her from the room.

Kashyyyk — Month Twenty, Day Seven PEF

The plan went off without a hitch as the freed Wookiees, enraged by their enslavement, rampaged through the facility with little need for Padmé or her crew to incite them. Asajj had disappeared mysteriously after the first hour, and once the revolt had reached the point of no return. Padmé hadn’t appreciated getting a message simply saying that her *friend* had some business to take care of and would return when she was finished — with no time estimate.

It wasn’t the most reassuring of messages, especially when she counted heavily on Asajj’s skills. The Force adept was worth a battalion in troops or more and having her skills at the ready were something she’d come to rely on. But it just went to show no matter how much she trusted someone they could always let her down. Not that Asajj had — yet. Padmé just didn’t appreciate having the adept duck out in the middle of a risky operation where her skills would be invaluable in the event of a catastrophe.

Fortunately, there hadn’t been one.

The Wookiees had been eager to speak with her and Threepio just as eager to translate. Padmé often asked herself why she kept the droid around when he was just another link to the past she was constantly trying to avoid. Not that she could when her main quest, other than discrediting Vader and one day killing him, was to locate her twins. Her hands clenched together, her knuckles whitening as she waited for the Wookiees to discuss her request.

Luke and Leia.

Where were they now? Had they been kept together or had they been separated? Were they with loving people or had they been placed in a person-less orphanage? Were they alive? Her heart clenched with the thought and she silently, but vehemently, denied it. She would *know* if something happened to her babies. That very knowledge was what drove her to keep searching. They were out there, somewhere, growing up without her all because of *him*. It was almost unbearable.

She'd started this campaign as a way to find her children and it had developed into more; a way to strike back at the very person she blamed for the turn her life had taken. It was a way to justify her actions and vindicate herself for her children. Yes, a part of her *was* to blame for the way things had gone — if she'd never given in to his advances things would likely have been different — but the only thing she was guilty of was loving too much.

And it had cost her everything.

"Mistress Padmé."

She turned towards the droid's voice. "Yes, Threepio?"

"The Wookiees have agreed to share what they know of the projects with your specialist and several have asked permission to assist in further development projects. One believes they were close to a breakthrough in special anomalies."

"Have them put together a proposal, Threepio. Max doesn't take just anyone we rescue under his wing."

"Very well, Mistress."

Padmé didn't correct him as he turned back to the Wookiees. She cast them one long look and then turned on her heel and strode from the room. Her boot heels were muffled by a substance on the deck, denying her the ease of frustration that always accompanied the strong echo. She headed for the observation deck, escaping as soon as she was able, and leaving behind those better suited in current temperament to deal with the refugees.

She couldn't deal with them; potential allies who would die for a cause they didn't understand. For a cause they wanted to join without intimate knowledge. For a cause that would make them slaves for other's freedoms. Freedom was all well and good, but freedom was nothing if all it amounted to was life. Life was worth living for several reasons, none of which were current to Padmé's state of affairs.

She lived for revenge, for the day when she would see *his* face shatter under the bolt of her blaster. For the day when she would steal from him the very things he'd stripped from her without thought or conscience. For the day she would pay him back for all of the slights and hurts; for the agony he'd inflicted upon her daily life. For the day she'd pay him back for the choices he'd made that had stolen her children from her and cast the galaxy into darkness.

He was at fault. He was—

“Padmé?”

She turned, finding Max standing in the doorway. His expression was carefully neutral, as if not wanting to intrude, but ready to do so if necessary.

“Are you alright?”

She managed to find a smile, though it lacked luster and life, her hands clenched in bloodless fists at her sides. “I’ll manage.”

“You’re thinking about them again.” It wasn’t a question.

“How can I not, Max? They’re out there somewhere. Alone and helpless, prey to *his* whimsies. I know they’ll be strong and he’s hunting down the strong like animals. They could be next.”

Max stepped into the room, securing the door behind him, and took two steps to where she stood. She reached for him in the instant he reached for her, her arms sliding about his neck. Clinging to his wiry strength, she let herself go.

The frustration of the last months, the futility of their quest and the fear that always accompanied a dangerous operation came pouring out in a different kind of frustration. It was one Max had been obliging as it helped ease his own. Her lips sought his, possessing with a fury that belied her previous anguish. Seeking that acceptance, that glorious release of tension that would let her think clearly once more.

And Max complied.

He gave as good as he got, despite there being no emotional attachment between them. Max gave her the release she sought, and partook of his own. That was their deal.

No strings, no commitments beyond their business arrangement. No messy relationship.

Yet, despite whatever help Max was, Padmé always found herself detached from the whole deal. Unlike the total physical and mental absorption that had overtaken her with her husband, she found herself regrouping mentally during these encounters with Max. Bracing herself for what was to come and *allowing* herself to find solace in physical pleasures; to be comforted by the presence of another and to bask in the illusion of what had been and would never be again.

It was in these moments in Max’s arms that Padmé allowed herself to believe she would succeed in the tasks she’d set herself. That she’d succeed in killing Vader. That she’d find her twins and raise them properly together. That the so-called Empire would be beaten and crumble under the strain of civil war.

Yet reality always intruded as they rearranged their clothing and settled themselves at the table, Max pouring them both caf. It was his ritual after these moments and one she didn’t attempt to understand. She accepted the cup gratefully, warming her hands around the sides even as she pushed now mussed hair from her face. To take a sip, letting the warmth replace that which was ebbing now that Max was no longer flush against her.

“Do you really think those Wookiees can help us?”

Padmé shook her head, meeting his gaze frankly. There was no embarrassment, no shy looks or stammering words between them. Padmé didn't think there ever would be for her again — and Vader was the reason. "Our operation is small and has to stay that way. Including the Wookiees would only reveal our presence to the Empire."

"Then what do you propose we do with them?"

"Let them go. They have homes and families to return to on the planet below."

"And if the Empire simply rounds them up to regain their information?"

"We take the two sections heads with us. They're the ones with the most useful information anyway. Threepio can translate if we need him to."

"Why do you keep that pain in the—"

Padmé's sharp look cut him off and her tone turned frosty. "Threepio has been with me for years, Max — you know that. For all his airs, he's quite useful — unless you've learned to speak six million languages lately."

Max scowled, reaching up to run one hand through the shaggy mop of hair that was in need of a trim. "Point taken. Even if the Wookiees are helpful, we're still leaving the knowledge base behind. I don't like that."

"I won't kill them just to keep the information out of the hands of the Empire." Padmé reiterated her stance firmly. "If you disagree with my politics on the matter, the door is there."

Max stiffened for a moment and then relaxed in his chair. "You pay me far too well to take issue with your humanitarian stances, Padmé. Where's Asajj?"

Anger flickered briefly across Padmé's features before she mastered it. "She didn't say — only that she had to leave and didn't know when she'd be back."

"That's unlike her."

"Lately, you mean."

"Whatever. I'm just saying that normally she lets you know when to expect her so we can plan around it."

"For now we'll just have to plan without her. It means I'll be relying more heavily on your intelligence, Max."

He smirked, his eyes sparkling with dark humor. "My intelligence — in all areas — is never in doubt. I have yet to provide you with faulty information."

"Yet, Max. There's always a first time for everything."

"Then keep this in mind, Padmé." Max pushed to his feet, his expression more exhausted than worried. "When Asajj decides to part ways with you, what lengths will she go to if it means saving her own skin?"

Padmé watched him leave, a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. Asajj was loyal to Asajj and their agreement was for mutual gain. She liked to believe that she and the adept had a closer relationship than Max implied and that her friendship with Asajj would persuade

them to part on friendly terms. The uneasy sensation that had gripped her when she'd received Asajj's message was back and it took a huge amount of will power to banish it.

Asajj and she were partners. There was no reason to believe that the Force adept had gone to betray them — not when she benefited too handsomely from the deal. Not yet anyway. And it was that “yet” that worried her.

Month Twenty One, Day 10 PEF, morning

Chapter 3

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor*, Iridonia Orbit, Iridonian System — Month Twenty One, Day Ten PEF

"My Lord?"

Vader didn't look up from his evening meal at the Captain's inquiry, though he tilted the knife just slightly so that the illumination glinted off the serrated edge. "Yes, Captain?"

There was a rustling sound, as if the officer were shifting his position slightly and then the clearing of his throat. "I have news, my Lord."

Ice blue eyes snapped up to pin the trembling man with an impatient look. "I dislike, riddles, Captain. What news?"

"Th— the troops have landed, sir. Ventress is with them."

"Excellent."

"They've met resi— resistance, sir."

Vader arched his eyebrows, waiting, the gesture all the more menacing for its simplicity and the Captain began to visibly shake. The utensils were placed carefully beside his plate as Vader plucked the napkin from his lap to wipe his mouth. The Captain continued when it became obvious the Dark Lord wasn't going to answer. "They've requested assistance."

The sound of the Captain's neck snapping was audible, a slight gurgle following it as the body hit the deck with a dull thud. Vader rose to his feet, dropping his napkin on his half-finished meal before striding towards the corpse.

"Assistance one such as you is incapable of obtaining, Captain." Vader's words were silky smooth as he strode from the room and pulled a comlink off his belt. "Admiral."

The line crackled for a moment. "Yes, my Lord?"

"Ready my ship. It seems I must handle this errand *personally*."

"Immediately, my Lord."

Vader's fighter dropped into the lower atmosphere of the planet with a screaming whine. It was a left over, a relic from the Jedi Temple; but it was his. Artoo tooted happily from the wing, sending an inquiry as to their destination. Vader smiled, flipping the ship into a

downward spiral and towards the coordinates Asajj had sent to his destroyer. “We’re just paying a visit to some old friends, Artoo. Ready missile tubes.”

Artoo tooted an alarm that Vader ignored as he flipped on the targeting computer. The message he’d received from Asajj indicated the troops were pinned down by an emplacement battery their intelligence hadn’t seen. His lips thinned. Asajj was proving to be worthless at her current ability levels. He needed to concentrate on her, focus on her fighting skills — which was proving hard to do as she slipped in and out of his sight constantly.

Steady beats began to increase in pace as Artoo counted down the time to missile lock.

Vader used his time to contemplate what to do with his reckless charge. Asajj reminded him a lot of himself in some ways. The passionate focus, the way she excelled in her lightsaber training — when she was there — and her disregard for orders. He was getting a taste of what his old mentors had been through and didn’t like it. On the other hand — his lips kicked into a grin as the tone steadied out into a monotone sound, indicating target lock — he wasn’t as restrained as his own instructors were. He had resources and tactics at his disposal a *Jedi* would never have considered. And Asajj’s elusive nature, her mysterious ways drew him in a *personal* fashion he hadn’t expected.

She’d been working for him for a little over a month, and in that time she’d spent a good deal of time away. Perhaps it was time to restrict her to his ship. True, she was growing in power, but not discipline. Not in the ways necessary to make her a truly powerful ally. Secretly Vader half-planned to one day use her to assist him in overthrowing his Master, but with her skill advancement sporadic at best, it was possible she could need a new motivation.

Death, in some cases, simply wasn’t enough.

Artoo let out a squeal as Vader depressed the button, releasing the missiles from their housings and sending them blasting into the target. It exploded in a fireball as he pitched his fighter around in a tricky maneuver and landed it almost next to the shattered mass of molten metal. His canopy popped as laser fire began to pour into the hull, and his lightsaber flared to life. Screams soon followed as some, recognizing the blade and face, threw down their weapons and ran in terror. He lifted a few of these with a wave of his hand and dropped them into their comrades, propelling the lot of them into the line of fire of his own troops.

Shrieks of the dying and hoarse shouts of the living mingled in a symphony of death as Vader swept through the ranks without mercy. Heads rolled in his path as he cut a swath from one end of the resistance fighters to the other. Seeing themselves out numbered and out matched, many broke and ran, disappearing into the heavily wooded areas around the battle field. Others attempted to surrender, only to be cut down where they stood.

No mercy.

No quarter.

No hope

Suddenly, amid the fighting, a blue energy blade sprang to life in the hands of a young man who looked to be no older than Vader himself. But he was a child compared to the things Vader had seen and done. Vader swept towards him, a shadow of death, his crimson blade

humming eagerly for the kill. He struck first, putting the Jedi on the defensive with a powerful overhead blow.

The Jedi parried, spinning away from the power attack and countering with a slash of his own. A slash that was intercepted and redirected back towards him as Vader's blade dove for blood. Somehow the Jedi evaded, rolling away, but not at a loss. Vader's blade had struck the back of the Jedi's sword arm and it now hung loosely at his side. Gamely, the Jedi took his blade completely in his off hand and lifted it to Vader.

"You can't win."

"Neither will you, traitor." The Jedi's tone was even and determined.

"Traitor implies having changed an allegiance." Vader replied conversationally. "My allegiance has ever been to the Chancellor — his role has simply changed; my loyalties have not."

"Your loyalty should have been to the senate, not its leader!"

"My loyalties are to those strong enough to retain them; enough of this."

The Jedi lifted his blade to parry but it was a fraction of a second too late as Vader's lightsaber sliced through his shoulder and cleaved downwards. An "O" of surprised pain appeared on the Jedi's face before his body crumpled and separated, falling to the ground in a heap.

Vader turned from the grisly scene with the casual air of someone who had just disposed of a nuisance and turned to examine the area around him. The rebelling faction had been routed. Asajj's lightsabers could be seen dipping into pockets of resistance, the screams of those she injured audible ever to where Vader was standing. His troops, led by the adept, swept easily through the remnants to converge on his position.

Asajj's blades came up as Vader lunged at her, drawing surprised shouts from his troops. Their blades locked, Vader's crossing both of hers at the hilt. His free hand grasped her wrists and bent them backwards with a vicious tug. Her eyes widened but she didn't drop her blades as the movement brought them close to her face.

"Deactivate your blades, Asajj."

The order was lined with steel and Vader knew she saw her death in his eyes if she failed to comply. She didn't. The blue and green blades disappeared, his own deactivating in the fraction of a second afterwards and a hair's breadth from skinning her chest. She flinched and something inside him twisted in a manner he hadn't expected. He *liked* to see her in pain; to have her afraid of him. He doubted she would ever be his equal, even with intensive training, and a part of him reveled in that superiority. She was at his mercy and would always *be* at his mercy.

The troops parted as Vader, his bruising grip never leaving Asajj's wrists, dragged her back towards where Artoo had his fighter hovering above the battlefield. The little astromech saw them coming and the fighter cruised forward with a puff of throttle. Vader finally stopped and turned, bending her wrists back towards her torso, his expression blank and void of all emotion. Asajj gasped as the weight of the Force came to bear in his muscles and she was driven to her knees in an attempt to ease the pressure.

"I should kill you for such incompetence."

"It was bad intelligence, Master."

"At least you can admit it." He didn't ease up on the pressure but he stopped pushing forward. "You're a fool, Asajj."

Dark eyes narrowed defiantly despite the vulnerable position she was in. "A fool who follows a fool. If your officers were better trained—"

Her words cut off with a gasp as he twitched his wrist. "I will deal with their incompetence just as I will deal with yours. Theirs is a lack of motivation. *Yours* is a lack of discipline despite your skill. Both are easily remedied."

"I can't learn anything if I am dead!"

"And neither can they." His agreement was equable. "You will learn the value of... *obedience*, Ventress."

She flinched, the connotations of his words implying something far, far worse than what she'd initially expected in this bargain. She dropped to the ground as Vader suddenly released her and jumped back into his fighter with one graceful Force leap. She couldn't help the pang of envy she felt upon seeing it. The man was a conduit for the Force, the very thing she strove to be and blast him; he'd never had to work for it!

Vader's stare pinned her in place when she would have made to rise. "The training deck in one hour."

Asajj looked around. "What of the—"

"One hour."

"Yes, my lord."

The cockpit on Vader's fighter closed, securing him inside and then made a sharp turn before blasting once more for space. He threw the ship into a tight spiral, feeling it strain against the atmosphere and Artoo shrieked a warning about hull pressure stresses. Vader straightened out his flight path at the last possible second just as Artoo was screaming a maximum stress warning and laughed. "Relax, Artoo. I've got it under control."

The chattering scold was unmistakable as Vader's fighter punched through the atmosphere and back out into space. Artoo was the only creature — save one other — who could get away with that kind of reprimand and live to tell about it. Vader scrolled through the read outs on his ship, taking note of the damage and letting his frustrations with Asajj bleed away until it sat just simmering below the surface. Harnessed energy that could be called upon at will and would be once she was on the mats.

It was time he took Asajj's training in hand and he knew exactly where he was going to start.

Month Twenty One, Day 10 PEF, evening

Chapter 4

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor*, Iridonia Orbit, Iridonian System — Month Twenty One, Day Ten PEF

Vader's fighter landed with barely a bump and Artoo whistled at him sharply as the little droid began to emerge from the socket. Several places on the fighter's hull showed superficial scoring from the battle and one of the power relays had shorted out on the flight back. Vader unbuckled his safety harness as the droid's beeping his insistence and the canopy popped open.

"Just do what you can, Artoo."

A query came back, almost morose sounding.

"No, I don't. I *trust* you to do it right."

Artoo made a rude sounding noise.

"I've been busy." His tone was short, signaling an end to that particular query. It was a tone Artoo recognized and would heed. "Whatever you can do to fix the power relays and boost shielding capacity will help; I'll have the techs send down the patches needed for the nose and I'll help you affix them tomorrow."

The astromech droid beeped an acknowledgement as Vader lifted him, almost absentmindedly, to the deck. Artoo immediately began making scolding noises at the technicians who were hanging back from the Dark Lord's fighter.

Vader pulled himself from the cockpit and dropped to the deck, his ice blue eyes sweeping the assembled. "The droid will tend to the damage. Anyone who fails to obey him, fails to obey me."

Artoo bleeped sharply at a tech that he deemed to be too close and the human leapt back immediately, going pale as Artoo's arc welding arm popped out and began to crackle with energy. Vader nodded sharply, certain his orders would be followed, and swept from the deck. Behind him, he could hear Artoo chattering at the technicians and mechanics, issuing orders as well as any drill sergeant.

A faint smile crossed his lips; Artoo sounded like his old mistress when she wanted things her way. His smile vanished as his boot heels struck the deck plating.

Padmé.

He'd been shocked when he'd learned of her survival and the rumors that she'd been keeping company with Alliance sympathizers. No. That wasn't right. He'd always known Padmé had believed foolishly in democracy. He'd always known she'd been willing to give her life for a cause in which she believed. He just hadn't thought she'd still believe in it after

its promises had died and the freedoms proven to be false. A part of him was surprised at her naiveté; she was smarter than that. Smart enough that she knew better than to cling to a dying cause and let it drag her down.

But then, maybe she'd changed.

Asajj had been little help in tracking her down, something he would rectify shortly. The Force adept was supposed to be tracking her, but had said little on the subject. No matter, once he was through with her, Asajj would know better than to tarry on her duties.

Sooner or later Padmé would come home... and when she did, he intended to see that she never left him again.

The training deck was empty when Vader stepped through the door fifty minutes later. He'd taken the time to finish his dinner and change into something that was more suitable for sparring — as that was exactly what he would be doing. Sparring with his apprentice until she satisfied him.

Even if it killed her.

He stretched in the time remaining before Asajj would put in her appearance. Taking a deep breath, he tempered his anger and allowed it to simmer and pushed it down into his reserves. It allowed him to control his anger, to tap into it for when he needed it. And he suspected this encounter with his... apprentice would test his resolve.

It was too tempting by half to kill her.

Ready and in control, he waited in the very center of the training room, his hands hanging loosely at his sides. His metallic hand flexed with the unconscious drive for action and he clenched it instead, allowing the thumb to slide over the finger tips.

Patience.

He would see action soon enough.

Asajj arrived minutes later, striding through the doors with an almost cocky swagger. "The resistance has been quashed, Master," she told him without preamble as she approached. "The last pockets are being mopped up as we speak. None escaped."

The *crack* of flesh meeting flesh resounded through the training deck as the back of Vader's open hand slammed across her cheek.

Surprised, she rolled with the blow — but not enough — and turned a full revolution in the air before hitting the mat on her stomach. Shocked and completely unprepared for the strike, she lay for a moment in stunned silence.

"You're weak, Asajj." Vader's displeasure was soft, the sting of his casual strike more resounding than his words. "Get up."

She started to push herself up with her arms and a casual sweep of Vader's feet knocked her back to the mat.

“Get up.”

Asajj tucked hands under herself once more and again Vader kicked them away.

“Get up.”

Asajj tilted her head to glare at him. “I would, if you would only let me.”

“And your weakness shows once again.” His eyes were hard, like diamonds, and glittered in the bright light of the training room. “Stay on your belly if that is your wish; it suits one of your disposition.”

Her lips tightened.

Vader felt her draw on the Force but remained where he was, his feet close to her head.

Asajj exploded into motion, rolling away with a burst of speed and twisting mid-roll to regain her feet. Her lightsabers jumped — almost on reflex— into her hands. “I’ll show you what suits my disposition.”

“Drop them.”

She hesitated and Vader flicked his fingers in an irritated wave. The lightsabers jumped from her hands, flying across the room to land with a clatter against the wall. Neither she, nor Vader, watched them fly. Asajj dropped into a defensive fighting stance, regarding him warily.

“I thought you brought me here to—”

“Silence.” Vader crossed his arms over his chest, watching her critically as she complied, the finger tips of one hand tapping a tempo on the opposite bicep. He took in her stance, finding little to criticize. Her back was slightly curved, arched in a way that belied her strength and suppleness. *If* she ever became controlled enough to battle him on even footing, she would hold the advantage in flexibility. Her feet were spread at shoulder width, her weight balanced on the balls of her feet. Her stance, even without her weapons, was that of a fighter.

It boded well for what she would need to learn.

Vader nodded once, a grudging approval. “Your weakness has never been your ability,” he told her shortly, “but your inability to control yourself.”

Her posture changed, straightening a bit at the unexpected praise, but remained wary. She’d been caught unawares by his casual disregard for her person once; she wasn’t going to again.

Good.

Vader waved her forward, noting that she kept her weight balanced and her steps were even. Her walk was that of the hunter stalking dangerous prey.

Good.

Asajj stopped just out of reach, waiting for the next command as hatred and anger simmered in the depths of her gaze. Vader returned it, certain his contempt for her was

showing when that anger flared briefly. He stepped towards her and she retreated back the same distance, keeping out of his reach.

Good.

She was worth his investment this one.

“Attack me.”

Her brow crinkled for a half second before her hands automatically opened. Vader struck in that heartbeat when her focus shifted to her lightsabers half-way across the room. Asajj doubled over, the hilts skidding across the floor as she lost control. Vader’s knee remained where it was, buried in her gut, his hands on her back. He pushed her backwards, watching her fall, contempt written all over his posture as she struggled to regain her breath.

“Focus and control. You rely too heavily on your lightsabers, Asajj; they are not the only tool with which you can attack.”

“They are the most dangerous.”

“If you believe that, then you not as smart as I gave you credit for.”

“Credit.” She spat the word, throwing herself into a backwards roll and regaining her feet in the same motion. “You give me little credit, Skywalker.”

Vader’s expression remained controlled, allowing the barb to pass. “I chose not to kill you when given the chance. I’ve chosen to train you, believing you have stunted your abilities by becoming reliant on your lightsabers. I chose to train you because I *believe* you can be more than you are — and of use to me. Perhaps I give you too much credit and you cannot be more than you are.”

“Perhaps you simply have not given me the chance.”

Vader took a step towards her and stopped himself, reigning in his temper before it controlled him. “You have not *taken* the chance. You disappear at every opportunity. No more! We will train, daily, and you *will* improve.”

There was no compromise in his tone, no softness in his stance. She was being given an order, one she couldn’t refute on penalty of death. Padmé was going to worry when she didn’t show up.

“I will need some time—”

“You’ve had time. Choose. Stay and train or I stop wasting my time.”

It was a choice that was no choice at all. If she didn’t comply he’d kill her without a second thought.

“I will train.”

“Excellent.” He practically hissed the word. “Now attack me — without your lightsabers — and we’ll see what we can salvage from your previous training.”

Asajj circled him, keeping her weight balanced and barely avoided a lighting quick strike by his hand — only to be sent to the mat as his feet swept her ankles. She rolled as she struck,

regaining her feet into a vicious swipe across the face that sent her straight back down.

Vader pummeled her relentlessly, striking her back to the mat with every opportunity and spent the next hour throwing her around like a rag doll.

She would lunge, he would parry. She would strike, he would counter strike. Her face took two more open handed blows before she learned to avoid them by ducking against her shoulder, or throwing up an arm to intercept. Vader pushed her hard; ruthlessly, relentlessly. She was a fast learner and quickly adapted to the brutal attacks.

He taunted her lack of discipline and focus, citing them in an almost casual tone as the reasons for her inability to strike him. It incensed her, drove away her ability to control herself, and opened her to more brutality.

Slowly, as the hour turned into two, she began to understand what he was saying. Her pride in tatters, her lip split and bleeding, one eyes swelling shut, she finally understood. Her body ached from the multiple blows and she was forced not only to draw on the Force but to sustain it to keep her injuries minimized. And she finally understood what he was trying to show her.

Control, even in anger, lent one power. Power over one's self; power over one's actions; power to choose and to make those choices happen.

Just as the realization dawned, he changed his tactics.

The Force was brought to bear and she went careening into a wall as she attempted to leap to Vader's back, arcing in at a dangerously controlled angle. She hit the floor just outside the mat and stayed there for a moment, attempting to regain her breath as pain spiraled up one side and the knowledge that she'd broken something filtered into her consciousness.

Vader straightened from his crouch as she attempted to rise, only to fall back with a moan. He strode to her side and knelt, flipping her onto her back with an almost casual flick of his wrist, his eyes glittering darkly in the light of the training salon. "When you are healed, we begin again."

With Asajj's broken body lying on the mat before him, Vader regarded her for a long minute. One hand reached out to touch the side of her torso where a bone protruded at an angle. He pressed, pushing it back into place as her eyes rolled back in her head and then flicked on the comlink on a nearby wall with a thought. His fingers lingered on the torn flesh of her side before dropping away.

"Admiral."

"Yes my Lord?"

"Send my medical team to this location."

"At once sir."

Vader heard the comlink click off and a ghost of a smile crossed his lips. They knew better than to question; they knew better than to ask if *he'd* been hurt. He rose to his feet and departed the training salon. Asajj would need a day or so in the bacta tank.

He would give her twelve hours before they would begin again.

Month Twenty One, Day 11 PEF

Chapter 5

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor*, Outer Edge Iridonian System — Month Twenty One, Day Eleven PEF

Twelve hours later, Asajj was back on the practice mat, her lightsabers absent this time at Vader's instruction. She was dressed in her un-mended clothing, having had no chance to do so, still shaking and slightly wet from the shower she'd needed to clear the bacta from her body.

Vader was waiting for her, leaning casually against the opposite door — the one that led towards his apartment suite — and knew he looked as rested as she didn't feel. He took her in with one contemptuous sweep of his eyes, the ice-blue irises speaking volumes as to how he believed she would fare. She moved with a slightly hitch, favoring the side where the rib had broken, and her eyes were shadowed.

There was a tilt to her lips that drew his gaze and encouraged it to linger.

She was determined. Focused. He could feel the difference in the way she approached the mat. It wouldn't be enough, not this soon, but it would be more of a challenge. If one thought of throwing around a child challenging.

They began without preamble, Vader uncoiling from his stance by the door and stepping onto the mat. His hands fell loosely to his sides, settling in for the work out he was determined to give her. It was a work out in which he already knew the outcome, but one that would be necessary.

Each time more would be learned. Each time more would be retained; each time, Asajj's skills would grow.

He broke bones without a care, showing her through pain what others taught through scholarship. He taught her torture where others would have taught mercy. He taught her to hate — and how to harness that hate.

After her third dip in the bacta tank, Asajj returned to the mat wearier than before, but the defiance in her eyes, the pure hatred and determination, burned as brightly as ever. Her time in the tank had been spent well — she'd analyzed Vader's tactics, retreating into a semi-meditative state to decrease her healing time, and come up with a pattern.

Nothing as quaint as parry, parry, thrust, thrust, but a measure of how and where he took his pleasures from hurting her. He would start slow, allowing her the chance to recover from her dip in the bacta tank. Once he was certain she was recovered as much as she would be, he began in earnest.

Today would be different.

Asajj hit the mat feeling better healed than she had previously despite the wariness that caused her limbs to ache. The weary feeling would disperse upon her fist call to the Force, giving her the energy and speed necessary to gain some small measure of triumph this day.

Vader was waiting for her, his stance the same as the previous times, an immovable statue of darkness and pain that would continue to show her how to harness her potentials. What he didn't yet know was that today would be the day the skills he sought to hone would be brought to bear on him.

They met in the middle of the mat and Asajj dropped into a fighting stance. One ankle was sore — he'd broken it last time — but the bones had mended enough to be of use. One arm still showcased the bruising force of his grip just as the side of her neck did the power in his kick. Her back ached, her chest hurt, but it all washed away as she drew on the Force for power, stamina and strength. Her stance didn't shift, didn't change, but the flicker of knowledge in Vader's eyes as he watched her was grudging approval.

She was a fast learner.

"Feeling better today, are we Ventress?"

"No thanks to you."

Vader's handsome features relaxed for a split second before his lips twisted in a feral smile. "No? Two days ago you were unable to last more than five minutes on your feet. Last session you were on them for ten."

"Until you broke one."

"Every battle has its casualties." His gaze raked her from head to toe, a speculative gleam in their depths. That they lingered on her body, in particular the damage he'd caused, unsettled her. "Shall we see what casualties today brings?"

"Perhaps it is you, Skywalker, who will be the casualty."

He laughed unexpectedly. "You have yet to touch me, my *apprentice*, but I do enjoy your attempts."

Asajj circled him, throwing a punch towards his head that he casually blocked and their dance began, Asajj taking the offensive for the first time since her training had begun, and used the lessons thus far learned. She went for vital areas, unsurprised when Vader first deflected and then countered her attacks as they came more rapidly — more frequently. She strove to keep him on the defensive and finally — hopping over a sweep of his legs before landing with a snap kick aimed at his groin.

It didn't connect but his response was brutal and expected. Asajj ducked, dropping to the mat as his arms struck towards her torso, bending backwards to avoid the swift kick that would have connected his knee with her forehead. Using her momentum, she swept her legs about his and *twisted*.

Caught unaware by her attack, Vader rolled with it on instinct, hitting the mat under her power for the first time since their training had begun. Asajj followed up on her sudden advantage, rolling with Force induced speed and lunging atop the Dark Lord. Her hands encircled his wrists, pinning them in place as she straddled his waist.

Vader stared up at her, the surprise having vanished from his expression, a stirring of something far more primal, of something far more threatening, taking root in their depths. In the euphoria of having bested him for a moment, she failed to notice it.

“Shall I make you the casualty today, Master?”

“You can try.”

Vader’s body arched unexpectedly, his torso coming up off the floor as his forehead connected with her breastbone. Her grip loosened and reversed, Vader taking her wrists in a tight grip as he followed up on the momentum. Asajj found herself pinned to her mat, her upper body flush with his, his hips pressing down across hers. She opened her mouth to protest when his head came down unexpectedly.

His lips met hers with bruising force, crushing and dominating. There was no tenderness behind his kiss; no compassion or softness. His lips demanded, taking what they wanted and letting her taste what was in store. She struggled against him, turning her head only to have it grasped tightly in a Force grip that was as bruising as his fingers on her wrists. She reached for the Force, to fight him with the very tools he wielded against her as anger and fear blossomed in her breast.

But the Force slipped away from her grasp, as if unwilling to answer her call with such power in her proximity. It was heady, like mixed liquors, and intoxicating — a draw on a primal level she fought with every fiber of her being. She struggled against the pull, trying to harness her anger, her fear, but there was nothing.

He knew then that she wanted him as much as she hated and feared him — he could taste it. He paused, pulling back and inhaling the scent of her. Feeling the effect of her nearness, of his *power* over her; of her own indecision and reckless urges. The smell, the *feel* of her fear was an aphrodisiac he couldn’t resist. One he didn’t have to forego as she was his to do with as he pleased.

Her hands twitched and he knew she sought to strike him — something he wouldn’t allow and something she’d pay for later. Just not in the manner she expected and one he would find infinitely more enjoyable.

“It’s time to reevaluate the nature of our... *association*, Asajj.”

Asajj shuddered, only adding fuel to the tension mounting between them as the movement inadvertently caused him to settled against her — leaving her with no doubt as to the direction of his thoughts. The implication was as repulsive as it was stimulating. Vader, a combination of physical charisma and power beyond her grasp, was simply a temptation she wasn’t capable of resisting — she didn’t have the willpower compared to his will — nor did she have the choice. Despite the illusion of one, Asajj knew to deny him was to die.

Even in this she would be his slave, bowing to his whim and doing as he demanded. The very thought made any pleasure she might have gotten from a willing coupling disintegrate.

Choking on her revulsion, the very thought of the act he desired as stifling as the weight of him pressing her into the mats, she summoned every ounce of her courage and rolled. To her surprise, Vader let her go and regained his feet. His gaze caught hers as she found her footing and by the gleam she knew the thought had not passed — if anything, it had only intensified.

Lifting her hand, she brought it to her mouth and deliberately wiped the taste of him from her lips. Vader's eyes narrowed, flaring with the heat of challenge. Her action had been taken as such and his next words confirmed her greatest fear.

"Your quarters; ten minutes."

She watched him leave; his confident stride that of a man who knew not what it was to be denied. The stride of a man who got what he wanted no matter the cost. The stride of a man who took simply because he wanted without thought as to the consequences.

He was the consequences

It was ten minutes that would pass too quickly.

Asajj hit the mat with bruising force, her muscles protesting the soreness that threatened to leave her prone. Her... *encounter* with Vader had gone exactly as she'd feared. He'd taken what he'd wanted, going so far as to prove he could make her want him despite her revulsion, and the sore of that wound festered like a wound turned septic.

That they'd gone from bed play to resuming their interrupted training session did nothing to help her frame of mind. It gave her no time to adjust, no time to recover and no time to find her balance. The earlier confidence she'd earned had vanished to be replaced by humiliation and degradation.

Another lesson no doubt, and one she could have done without.

Vader watched her from across the room, invigorated and relaxed from their brief encounter as he hadn't been in weeks. His lust momentarily sated, his mind focused, he was better attuned to the world around him since... since he'd first heard of Padmé's survival. His lips twisted. He should have taken Asajj to his — to *her* — bed sooner.

Taking her from the bed back to the training mat had given him a new perspective. If he didn't want to break his new toy, he'd have to be more careful. The idea of having her at his mercy — in more ways than one — was gratifying. Humbling Asajj, making her bend to his will — making her bend to *him* — was a distraction he found invigorating. He literally held her life in his hands — and she would do anything to escape him.

It was the challenge he needed to occupy him while he waited for Padmé to be found. Casually moving towards Asajj, his steps even and measured, he was stopped by a shaky voice from the doorway.

"M-my lord."

He whirled on the sound. "This had best be important, Lieutenant."

The Lieutenant paled. "A— a re-report, sir. F-from Kashyyyk."

Vader opened his hand and the datapad leapt from the shaking Lieutenant's hand. Vader dismissed him with a wave and the young man practically fell out of the training hall in his rush to escape. The doors closed as the datapad zipped quickly across the room.

Asajj chose that moment to lunge at the Dark Lord from behind.

Vader didn't even turn, simply lifted his other hand and caught her mid-air, slamming her back into the mat. The air whooshed from her lungs as the datapad came to rest in his hand and he lifted it to scroll through the message. Asajj struggled to catch her breath, panting as she fought to fill her lungs completely. The grip of the Force tightened as Vader's hand twitched with irritation, becoming uncomfortable as his hand began to fold into a fist.

A curse blistered the air as the datapad disintegrated in a shower of parts under the crush of his metallic hand. The grip on her eased as his hand opened and her breathing came more readily

"*Ktah!*"

"Master?"

There was a pregnant pause as Vader inhaled deeply, curbing his anger. "The Wookiees have overrun the research station at Kashyyyk."

Asajj said nothing. If she spoke it would reveal what she knew and set her up for further punishment. Vader would know she was keeping Padmé's whereabouts a secret; he would know about her hand in the attack; he would know of her ties to his wife and kill her without a second thought. She chose instead to volunteer nothing — it was the safer course of action. And a part of her, a small part, couldn't yet bear to surrender Padmé Skywalker to this monster — Asajj respected her and what she was doing too much.

Vader clenched his hand about the metallic fragments of the datapad before flinging them away in disgust. "They will need to be taught a lesson; but not," he told her darkly, "until you've shown proper progress."

"I will endeavor to learn swiftly." Asajj pulled herself off the mat but stayed out of his reach with a wince. "It would appear my assignment list grows by the hour."

"Indeed." The look Vader threw her way was veiled and speculative — charged. It left no doubt in her mind as to which *assignments* he thought. "Come with me."

Asajj didn't question the order as Vader turned and strode from the hall. She doubted he would take her again so soon, but anything was possible. She moved to keep up, but Vader didn't appear to notice her as his pace quickened. They traversed the corridors, the troops giving them a wide berth before the Dark Lord led Asajj into his apartments. He stopped in the outer office and tapped something out on the console connected to his desk.

The Force adept hung back in the doorway despite the fact Vader appeared to be ignoring her. There was something in his stance that left her wary. As if he was torn between duty and pleasure — his. Though, what he could possibly do to make matters worse, she didn't yet know. She didn't put it past him, however.

Vader finally spun the console around and shifted to the side so she could view the readout and, with a start, realized she was looking at the layout of the Kashyyyk station. She kept her features carefully neutral, not asking, but not showing disinterest either.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Vader leaned against the deck and watched her. "This is the outpost at Kashyyyk that has now been eliminated as a productive part of the Empire. Whomever, or whatever group planned the raid did so carefully and with highly classified information. My task for you is two-fold, Ventress; infiltrate and eliminate."

“That will be difficult, seeing as how there is so little information on the subject.”

“Seeing as how you *claim* to be the best Hunter in the sector...”

Her spine snapped straight. “I *am* the best Hunter in the sector. This assignment will not be difficult.”

“Excellent.”

Vader tapped another key on his desk and the image changed to reveal a list of planets and names. None of them moved fast enough to ignore, but the red names stood out. Asajj regarded it cautiously curious, but didn’t move from her position. She wasn’t getting any closer to him than she had to unless ordered.

“What is that?”

“The names in red are the Jedi who have been eliminated.” Vader keyed up another list, this one with names in orange. “These are the ones whose whereabouts were known, but have somehow slipped away. My intelligence tells me that the Jedi Hunter who is saving Jedi—”

“*What!*”

Vader slanted her an annoyed look. “For someone who *claims* to be a Jedi Hunter, you are woefully uninformed.”

“I had heard the rumor of this Jedi *savior* but I did not believe it!” Asajj’s temper hissed through her lips with the words and she took a step towards the list without thinking. Her good sense was momentarily over run by her outrage. “Before it was but a warning, now it’s all out salvation? Who is he? I’ll have his head!”

“We don’t yet know of his identity. However, should you like to investigate...”

“Was that not one of the things you required my skills for?” Her words were laced with disdain. “One of the *original* tasks you set me?”

“You have not yet accomplished it.” His eyes were hard, his tone dangerously conversational. “Continue to fail me, Asajj, and I will have no choice but to find other... *permanent* uses for you.”

The threat was accompanied by a glance towards her chambers beyond and Asajj took a hasty step backwards. “If you will release me from my training, I will begin my search immediately.”

“You’ll not be free of me that easily, my apprentice. You are only now beginning to show promise — in all areas — as I seem to have found proper motivation. When you are ready, I will let you know.”

They stood for a long minute before Asajj finally bowed, her temper and anger simmering between them with dark energy. “Of course Master. With your leave I shall retire to meditate.”

Vader waved her away and turned back to his console. Asajj had her uses, true, but there were bigger concerns at the moment that required his attention. Once those concerns were dealt with, Asajj’s training could be taken to the next level.

Despite her progress, Vader was not yet ready to set her loose on the galaxy. She was reckless and undisciplined, a mixture of fire and ice — not unlike himself — that needed to be carefully tempered into a tool he could use. His lips twisted. At Asajj's present rate she'd have the discipline to start her search in a matter of weeks. And those weeks would be enjoyable ones — for him.

Month Twenty One, Day 16 PEF

Author's Note: My apologies; I thought I had posted this days ago — guess not!

Chapter 6

Padmé's Office, Secret Base — Month Twenty One, Day Sixteen PEF

Lines of code twisted and turned as Max edited and reedited the profile he was slicing. His fingers danced across the keypad without looking as the patterns shifted before his eyes. *Almost there...*

“Sir?”

He frowned, entering another string of code as he ignored the inquiry of the protocol droid. It was easy to get lost in his task, to be absorbed by the lines of data — to revel in their puzzle and solution in silence. It didn't last — it never did.

“Sir!”

Max didn't look up from the keypad. He was bare moments away from gaining complete access to the system Padmé wanted cracked. “What is it, Threepio?”

“I hate to bother you sir, but it is Mistress Padmé.”

Max's fingers stilled on the keypad, bare strokes away from entry into the system. “What about her?”

“She appears to be in distress. I cannot wake her”

With a quick spin of his chair, he was on his feet and headed towards the doorway. “Where is she?”

“In her office, sir. I do believe she collapsed from...”

Threepios voice trailed off as Max brushed by him impatiently, headed for Padmé's office. It was on the other end of the hallway — a hallway he hadn't seen in over a day since he'd begun slicing the system he'd been assigned. Threepio's shuffling footsteps were drowned out by his ground eating strides, the droid being left behind as he practically ran the length.

Palming open the door, he was stopped dead by the sound of a pitiful wail. “Padmé.”

Padmé had passed out across her desk, her head pillowed by her arms in a pose that should have looked restful. It was anything but if the thrashing and agonized sounds that emerged from her lips were any indication. Max silently cursed. The dreams again. Always the dreams.

“Padmé!”

She woke with a start, not comprehending the firm surface under her backside, not really seeing the blurry image in front of her. It took a moment for her eyes to focus and when they did, it was Max’s familiar and concerned countenance that greeted her. He was standing just inside the open doorway to her office with Threepio coming up quickly behind him. She looked bewildered, not understanding her surroundings — or rather, the lack of a certain fixture to her surroundings.

“You were dreaming again.”

Padmé’s defenses, not yet in place, crumbled to nothing as desolation swept through her at Max’s gentle confirmation. Her expression sagged and she covered her face with her hands as choked sobs broke through. She shook, the agony of the dream replaying as reality, the knowledge that her children had been stolen, that she hadn’t even had the chance to hold them — that she couldn’t hold them even now — shredding her heart.

Two long strides brought Max to Padmé’s side. Strong arms encircled her, lifting her from the chair before he took her place and cradled her close. She burrowed against him, cling to him, as the heart rending sobs took their toll. He didn’t say anything, didn’t offer false comfort, simply let her draw what she could from his presence and his touch. His hands rubbed her back, one foot on the floor gently pushing the chair so it rocked slightly. It was several long minutes before the tide of emotion ebbed and she was able to draw a breath without it breaking.

She sniffled.

Max produced a handkerchief from one pocket that was as crushed and stained as the rest of his clothing, but she took it gladly, wiping her eyes and nose before taking a deep, shaky breath and letting it out. She didn’t move from his embrace, drawing on his strength and using it to bolster her mental defenses. They sat in silence as Padmé mentally regrouped, Max’s hands running a steady, soothing track around her back. The warmth and comfort she drew from it helped bolster her determination as the resolve to track her children down came to the forefront again.

She finally lifted her head from its resting place against the base of Max’s neck and cupped his face with one hand as their eyes met. “Thank you, Max.”

“You know I’ll always be here.”

A faint smile crossed her lips and a nod. “I know.”

Max examined her critically. She seemed recovered so he rose, putting her back on her feet and stepped back. “I’m almost into the database you wanted. Anything in particular I’m looking for?”

“Anything, Max.” the familiar return to routine helped stabilize the last of her wayward emotions. It always did. “A target big enough to send a message.”

“I’ll see what I can find.”

He turned, exiting the office and returned to his console to finish working on the codes. Padmé’s little episode had likely set him back by several hours, but the initial slice was

always the hardest. Now that he had a feel for the system things would go much more smoothly.

Eleven hours later; Padmé's Office

The diagram changed position as Padmé flipped the switches on her desk and frowned at it. "That still doesn't look right."

"That's what it says in the database." Max checked the feed from the data stream he was uploading. "Hold on a second, let me see if I can clear it up."

There were several minutes of straight tapping and clicking as Max sorted his way through the jumble of data that made up the file he was attempting to crack. The hologram flicked before inverting, flashing a series of colors as the data filled in bits and pieces. It finally flipped before straightening out again — this time in a semblance of order she understood.

"There — that's it."

Max looked up from his console and grinned. "That's better. Sorry about that, the encryptions are funky."

"Funky?"

He shrugged. It was as good a word as any. "They're not difficult to crack at a basic level, they're just using a random algorithm that's time consuming, I can crack them — they'll just come out inverted and backwards."

"And now that you know?"

"It'll be easier — but not less time consuming."

"It is what I pay you for."

"So the rumor says."

He settled back in the chair and propped his feet on the table as she circled towards him, her eyes on the diagram. She caught his movements out of the corner of her eye but didn't chide him for it. He'd just spent the last forty eight hours slicing into a potentially high-profile target's database — one she was certain she could use — and hadn't yet slept. His feet on her desk were the least of her worries.

The hologram was incomplete, missing sections, including the essential information on where its physical form was being built. It was information Max would need to obtain before she could even think about planning an attack. Her thoughts drifted back to Asajj for a fleeting moment — she would be invaluable when it came time for their assault.

"Is this everything?"

"For now." He yawned and stretched. "Until I get some sack time. Even machines need *some* downtime, you know."

"I know." She stopped next to him and flipped the hologram off, her look was critical; the rumpled shirt, day's growth of beard and blood shot eyes characterized one of Max's slicing

binges. He looked and sounded exhausted.

Padmé pushed his feet off the table and settled into his lap. She turned her knees over the chair's arm, settling herself more completely into the comfortable position as Max placed his feet back on the table. His hands settled low on her waist as she leaned against him, one arm around his neck, her fingers toying with the ends of his shaggy hair. "This would be a lot easier if Asajj were here."

"She's pretty useless on a keyboard. Besides, if she were here, you'd be trying to think of ways to get rid of her."

"Or using her help for more important things." She sighed, tilting her head against his shoulder. She was as weary as he was — probably more so since she hadn't been sleeping well since Asajj's disappearance. Not that she slept well any time. "I'm worried about her."

"She's a Force adept — there's not a lot she can't handle on her own."

"True — but she's not as disciplined as a Jedi. Asajj lets her temper run away with her sometimes. Surely if she was able she'd have contacted me by now."

"I'm sure she's fine."

"It's been almost three weeks, Max. She's never disappeared this long before."

"Maybe she doesn't want to be found."

Padmé was silent, turning the idea over in her head, but it didn't sound right. Something about this whole situation put her on edge — everything put her on edge — and she had a sneaking suspicion that something was happening she didn't fully comprehend. She finally shook her head. "That doesn't make sense. Our arrangement works perfectly for her; not only does she get to be a thorn in Vader's side, she has the freedom to pursue her personal goals."

"Easy mamma shaak," he teased lightly, "the cub isn't clawless."

"You really think I'm worrying for nothing, don't you?"

Max nodded and leaned back further. The chair creaked as it tipped but didn't fall. Max's head fell back and a weary sigh brushed against her cheek as she lifted her head to look at him. His eyes were closed, the strain lines more visible around them in repose.

"I should let you sleep."

"No — you should join me." He cracked open one eye. "Unless of course you have better things to do with only bits and pieces of Intel."

"Some of it's in their native language; I was *thinking* of having Threepio take a look at it."

Max frowned. "I can just run it through the translator unit."

"It's not as accurate as he is and you know it."

"Just once I'd like you to admit that he's more trouble than he's worth."

"More trouble than he's worth?" Padmé arched her eyebrows. "How many other droids out there are programmed with six million languages, cultures and adaptability subroutines?"

“None,” Max conceded. “But he can’t use a blaster, he can’t slice worth a damn and he’s prissy beyond all belief. He gets on my nerves and he makes negotiations difficult — who knows what he’s got in that memory bank of his.”

Their eyes locked.

“Exactly.” Padmé inhaled deeply, fighting against the surge of grief and frustration that always accompanied the thought of her children.

Max’s fingers flexed before easing, as if fighting some inner battle.

Padmé covered his hands with hers and squeezed. “I know you don’t like him — *he* knows you don’t like him. He helps me feel closer to my kids, Max. Try to understand?”

His answering smile was faint. “He’s yours to do with as you want, Padmé. Where’d you get him anyway?”

She hesitated. Max knew very little about her past — she intended to keep it that way — other than the fact that she had two children whom had been stolen from her and she was looking for them. When he’d asked about their father she’d simply told him that their father had been a casualty of the clone wars. He hadn’t pushed further. Would it hurt if he knew where Threepio had come from?

“He was a gift.”

“A gift.” He sounded skeptical. “From who? He might be a pain, but he’s a valuable pain.”

A memory stirred of her first encounter with Threepio — and the innocent boy who’d built him — and she ruthlessly squashed it before it blossomed further. “My husband. He was kind of a wedding present.”

“Ah.” Max didn’t push further. They’d agreed not to discuss her husband — not when he’d already deduced that the man’s death was tied to Vader. Despite his arrangement with Padmé, Max really wasn’t interested in knowing about the man she’d been married to. “So what else is he good for?”

“This and that.” She didn’t elaborate, though it was no secret she’d been a Senator before the birth of her children. “He’s better suited to official functions but he gets the job done.”

“Even if he is the biggest priss I’ve ever met.”

She darted a look towards where Threepio was across the room, powered down but likely still able to record the goings on around him. “He is rather officious at times, but he’s as useful in his own way — just as you are.”

Max’s hands slid down to grasp her hips and tightened suggestively. “Care to show me just *how* you’d like to make use of me?”

“Maybe later.” She softened the rejection with quick grin before it faded. “I’m going to keep looking for signs Asajj might have left us.”

“Padmé...”

“I know, I know,” she shifted away and Max dropped his feet to the floor so she could stand. “I can’t help but feel something’s wrong. It’s not like her to just up and leave without

some kind of indication as to when she'll be back."

"Sign to you, you mean."

Padmé sighed, exasperated. "Isn't there anyone we work with that you like?"

"I can think of one." The appreciative look in his eye left little doubt as to whom. "She's the only one who appreciates my skills."

"I couldn't do this without you, Max."

"I know." Max leaned forward in his chair, rubbing his hands over his face. "And I know you couldn't do this without Asajj or that golden priss. I'm tired and my boss is a slave driver — just ignore me."

Her lips twitched. "Ignore you, huh?"

"The caf in my system has run its course; I'm cranky."

Padmé chuckled as she settled on the edge of her desk. "Hit the sack, Max. I'll make do with what you pulled from the database until you can delve get back into it."

"Just... don't plan for Asajj's help, alright?"

"This is a fledgling operation at this point." She reminded him. "I would think she'll have returned by the time we're ready to execute."

Max pushed to his feet, swaying a little before finding his balance. "Alright, but don't say I didn't warn you if she's still not back and we have to go on without her."

"You do your part," she patted the console behind her, "and let me worry about mine, okay?"

He shrugged. Max rarely took part in the actual assault until the path was clear, leaving Padmé and Asajj to deal with the resistance they'd encounter. He mostly stayed behind, playing guide and assisting with the occasional remote slice. "I'll see you in the morning."

"It is morning." She looked pointedly at the chrono by the door that said 0400.

"Morning will be whenever I wake up. Do you need this asap, or can I sleep myself out and take another crack at it then?"

"Sleep yourself out — you'll need the energy."

He ducked his head, using one hand to tuck a stray curl of her hair over one ear as he brushed a casual kiss across her cheek. She placed one hand on his chest before he turned away, heading towards the door.

"Max?"

He paused as the door slid open, looking back at her wearily. "Yeah?"

"Thanks."

A faint smile flickered over his lips before he disappeared.

Padmé sighed, feeling as if a weight had settled back on her shoulders with his departure. She settled into the chair he'd just vacated, collecting one of the datapads from her desk and turning it on as she curled her feet beneath her. The list of Jedi that Max had retrieved from Vader's files flickered to life, the red names mercifully absent, as her eyes drifted from one name to the next and their known whereabouts.

Anoat

Chalacta

Dantooine

Fondor

Gyndine

Lianna

Toydaria

Ungul

Zhanox

With a sigh, she let the pad droop and tilted her head back against the chair, looking to the silent projector on her desk and then to the viewports beyond.

She hadn't lied to Max when she said the attack on the facility was going to take time to plan and it was going to have to be done carefully. The preliminary data he'd obtained for her had indicated that the facility was being carefully hidden but had few other security features in an attempt to keep it low key. Minimalists had designed the defenses and Asajj's help would be invaluable if they wanted to get in, blow it and get out.

Of course, that was several weeks away, once they'd figured out exactly what it was they were going after — aside from some ship — and exactly the best way to infiltrate the facility.

For the moment, there was another task she had to attend.

Her attention turned back to the datapad she pressed several buttons, calling up the current Intel on Vader's fleet. Feeding the files together, she hooked a line to her main console in her desk. She chewed on the tip of her thumb absently as the computers worked together, feeding data back and forth in one of Max's more useful programs.

Names on the list changed places based on their last known location, shifting their order as they accommodated the information sorting protocols. Finally, the pad beeped and one of the names flashed, indicating the closest Jedi to Vader's current location. Not only were they at the top of the list, but they were also on a planet that was within striking distance of her base.

Padmé placed the datapad back on her desk and retrieved another, this one from a hidden compartment in her desk that had been fitted into the main drawer. Inputting her password she got to work quickly, taking the opportunity while Max rested and Asajj was missing to work on her project. The information from the other datapad was downloaded and the first steps implemented in a larger plan.

Another datapad was retrieved from her desk, this one containing information on the fledgling Alliance's membership and their movements, both official and covert. Her lips twisted into a hard line, noting that certain members would be on the same planet as the flashing name within days of Vader's arrival. She was determined to get to the flashing Jedi's name first, to rob Vader of his prize and take a little of her own revenge.

That meant their next unscheduled stop would be a... *visit* — to Jedi Knight Lena Kreebo on Dantooine.

Month Twenty Two, Day 9 PEF

Chapter 7

Dantooine — Outlying Wilderness — Month Twenty Two, Day Nine PEF

Warm winds tugged at the hem of their clothing as they walked down the ramp of the nondescript shuttle at the edge of the clearing. Padmé checked her datapad for reference before checking her surroundings to verify the details. Satisfied, she tucked the datapad back into her belt.

This was the place.

“Max, take Threepio and the shuttle back to the spaceport. Wait for me there, okay?”

“Are you sure you don’t need my help? Threepio can get the ship back with the auto pilot.”

Padmé hefted her modified blaster and tucked it into the ever present holster strapped high on her thigh. “I’m sure. I’ll be fine, Max — don’t worry.”

“I’d feel better if Asajj were here.”

Her eyebrows arched in surprise. The Force adept had been missing for over a month and it was the first time she’d heard of Max wanting her for anything. “That’s a first.”

“Yeah, well, don’t get used to it. This place leaves me on edge.”

“This place is a main hub of activity for smugglers. I don’t like it much either since we’ve a better chance of running into people I’d rather avoid, but this has to be done.”

“You’re the boss.” Max saluted her with two fingers. “Don’t be late or we’ll come looking.”

She grinned. “Just get the rest of the information we need for the carrier attack. I won’t be long.”

Max waved her away as he retreated back up the ramp. The repulsor engines roared to life again and Padmé backed away to avoid being caught in the backlash. The shuttle departed for the space port several kilometers away, leaving Padmé in the wilderness. She didn’t watch it leave as she was confident Max would follow her orders, and turned to survey the area once more.

Confirming her bearings, she began walking.

It was almost two hours later when a small village appeared on the edge of her vision, smoke trails drifting lazily into the sky. Padmé stopped, checking her bearings before smiled faintly. Unless Max had dropped her in the wrong clearing — and he’d never done that before

— this was the place. Tucking the datapad away again, she reached down to place one hand on the butt of her blaster.

Long strides, as long as she was able, ate up the distance between her and the unnamed village. Before too long she was standing on the outskirts watching small animals scurry in their pens — and the children of the inhabitants chase those that escaped the confines. She smiled pleasantly to those around her, knowing she looked odd, and was unable to help it.

Time was of the essence. Vader's ship would be in orbit in less than three days; if she wanted to act, it had to be now.

Padmé stopped by the village well, a pang of nostalgia striking her as she bent to lift the scooper from the bucket on the edge. This place reminded her of her home on Naboo... the image was quashed before it could form and she took the drink she needed hastily. Water dribbled down her chin and she lifted her free hand to stop it.

"Here, missy," a kindly voice spoke from behind her, "a rag to help dry you off."

Padmé replaced the dipper and turned, accepting the rag from the outstretched hand. Brown eyes met brown and Padmé was certain she'd found her quarry. Recognition and fear had flickered, for the briefest of moments, in the depths of the eyes of the woman who faced her.

"Thank you."

The woman who watched Padmé had a greenish tint to her skin typical of the Mirilian race, but lacked the normal tattoos that displayed age, maturity and success; the tattoos that would have been distinctive and an immediate give away as to her real identity. Despite the change, Padmé found she had no real trouble identifying the woman. It helped she was the only Mirilian among the humans.

"You're welcome. I suggest you move on, stranger, before you draw more attention than you wish."

The woman stepped back, turning to go and Padmé's hand dropped to her blaster butt. "Hold it."

"Was there something else you require?"

"Just a moment of your time, Miss Kreebo."

Something flickered in the other's eyes. It was there and gone so quickly Padmé would have missed it had she blinked. She didn't. Nor did she miss the shift in body posture even as the woman before her denied the claim — badly. Jedi had never been overly good at lying.

"I'm sorry; you must have mistaken me for someone else."

Padmé sighed. It was the same thing every time. "Jedi Knight Lena Kreebo, my name is Padmé Naberrie — and I'm here to save your life."

The Dantooine spaceport was a mess of ships, crates, goods and services, and abounded with seedy characters. In the clutter, it was difficult to make out the faded makings on the ship

before them, but it was undoubtedly one of the ships in their database. One of the ships that had been a part of their fleet until it had been taken auspiciously by a member of their own — or rather, a woman who should have been a member.

Bail Organa dusted off one shoulder of his cloak and turned his face to his companion. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“A good idea or not, we have not had any luck meeting with her before this.”

“Tracking her, you mean.” Bail turned his gaze back to the ship, noting as he did the golden protocol droid that descended the ramp only to hover around the base of it. A man Bail vaguely remembered descended behind the droid, snapped something and the droid turned to disappear back into the ship.

“It is her, Bail. And we must try.”

“Mon, how do you know this isn’t a trick?”

“She has no love of the Empire; she has proven that in her unorthodox methods.”

“She has also declined our invitation repeatedly.” Bail pointed out unnecessarily. “Unless you are prepared to give her what she wants in return, she will never assist us.”

“We do not need her to assist us, Bail. Simply changing her tactics to a more diplomatic tract will help save million, possibly billions of lives — on both sides.”

“The woman I remember would never have sunk to these depths.”

“The woman you remember is no more, it would do you well to remember that.” Mon Mothma’s tone was sharp. “She’s become jaded and war hardened; she’s not the woman either of us knew.”

“Don’t you mean disillusioned? She believed in what we were doing until we refused her.”

“And I would refuse her again. It is too dangerous; you of all people know the risks. If they should be discovered—”

“I know,” Bail folded his hands behind his back and rocked on his feet from toes to heel before becoming stationary once more. “And I, more than anyone, know where she is coming from.”

Silence descended between them for a few moments as they continued to watch the shuttle being prepped. The human male was the only visible individual around the base of the ramp. His nondescript appearance lent him the look of any dock worker or trader; the golden protocol droid was nowhere in sight.

“You would think she’d be rid of him by now.”

“Who, Max?”

Mon smiled faintly. “The droid. With the problems we have had with them lately, I am surprised she does not have him melted down for scrap.”

“The leaks you mean,” Bail scrutinized the ship, careful to avoid doing so blatantly and drawing attention. “They may not have security like we do, but I do not believe her droid is a

security risk.”

“Any particular reason why?”

“His model is unique — for the moment. A custom made job that has yet to be duplicated.”

“All the more reason to discard it immediately; we never did learn where she obtained it.”

“Regardless of how much she has changed, she would not jeopardize her outfit with the possibility of a security leak of that magnitude. The droid likely does not leave the sight of either herself or one of her associates.”

“Any luck contacting them?”

“Nothing.” Bail nodded towards the shuttle. “He’s the reason.”

Mon Mothma scrutinized the man Padmé had somehow convinced to go with her.

He was loading the shuttle from the automated cranes and carrying every crate on board manually — or with the nearby lifts. “I never took him for the type who would sink to such levels of depravity.”

Bail nodded. “He must do it for Padmé. It’s a shame because his skills are superb.”

“Maybe we should focus on him,” Mon said. “Get him to influence Padmé to come back to the Alliance.”

“Do you really think that’s possible?”

No answer was forthcoming and Bail didn’t press the issue. Instead, he changed the subject back to their earlier topic of security leaks and the droids that were causing them. “Have we had any luck tracking them?”

“Two are in custody. The third has yet to be apprehended.”

“Any chance we were followed?”

“There is always the chance.”

“Perhaps this is best postponed then.”

“It is not like you to be nervous, Bail.”

“Two years ago I would agree with you. Parenthood has changed my outlook on my personal safety.”

“I trust the child is well?”

“Growing stronger daily. Breha is the mother I always knew her capable of being.” The line of questioning changed, as it must. To follow through with it was a dangerous game they didn’t dare play even when certain no one would understand their words. “Is this wise?”

“She was a founding member, Bail; it is only right that she side with us. When the Master and his apprentice are defeated we will be free to answer her questions honestly.”

“The length of time will be interminable for her and she does not believe we are capable of effecting change within the system.”

“Then we must convince her.”

“Then we had best not lose this chance — there she is.”

They moved together through the crowded docking bay towards the young woman who strode purposefully towards the nondescript ship. She made no effort to hide her presence, no effort to mask her appearance. She was rumored to be dead on most planets and knew it — and took advantage of it.

“Padmé.”

A modified blaster jumped into one hand as the woman spun — and stopped, anger and hatred hardening her features for a briefest of moments before it settled into a cool mask. Good manners prevented her from making a scene. “Senator Organa; Mon Mothma.”

Bail nodded to her as Mon Mothma remained silently aloof. “It is good to see you.”

“Is it?”

“It is.” Unfazed by her sharp retort, Mon Mothma didn’t flinch. “We have little time, so I will be short. Come with us.”

“Just like that,” Padmé scoffed. “I have no desire to go anywhere with the likes of you. The package I promised you is waiting to be retrieved at these coordinates.”

Bail accepted the datapad she offered and checked it. Lena Kreebo, Jedi Knight, just as Padmé’s coded transmission promised, along with where they could pick her up. Satisfied, he flicked it off. “Everything’s here.”

“Unlike *some* people, I know where my obligations lie. Just make sure *he* can’t find her.”

“We’ll do our best.”

Padmé’s expression hardened. “Like you’re doing with my children?”

Bail and Mon shared a look. “We are doing what is necessary, Padmé, can you not see that? It is for their own protection.”

“I’m their mother; not a monster!”

“If you would just come with us, back to the Alliance where you belong, we could—”

“Belong?” Padmé jumped on the word with a vengeance. “This would be the same alliance I helped form? The one who believes that *democracy* will solve all its problems? The same self-style Alliance that stole my children and refuses to tell me where they’ve taken them? *That* Alliance where I belong?”

“If you had any sense of loyalty—”

“Oh that’s *rich*!” Harsh laughter broke from between Padmé’s lips. “You’re going to lecture *me* on loyalty? Where was your loyalty when you refused to tell me what happened to Obi-Wan, the Jedi who tried to do something about the coming darkness while you stood

around and did nothing? Where was it when my children were born and you stole them from me before I had the chance to hold them?”

“It is too dangerous for them to be with you; if Vader were to track you down—”

“He hasn’t and he won’t!” The former Senator’s tone was as hard as ice and just as frosty. “My operation may be small but at least it’s effective.”

“We are effective — simply in another manner. Your tactics have no place in the Alliance; there is no need for those kinds of hostilities.”

“Isn’t there? Diplomacy has failed, Mon!” Padmé spat the words vehemently. “*Your ideal has failed.* How can you be effective if you don’t show your resolve? At least I’m doing something!”

“If you would simply join us, you would see that our movement is gaining strength and support—”

“A long term solution, one that will be effective when this Sith Lord dies — is that it? How long are you willing to wait, Mon? Five years? Ten? Twenty? And while you wait, *my children are growing up without me!*”

“This won’t get them back, Padmé.”

Whirling on Bail, her expression fierce, she pinned him with a hard look. “Nothing will, will it? Next time send a delivery boy. I grow tired of these recruitment speeches. Until you’re willing to give me what I want and actually make a move against the tyrant, I want nothing to do with you and your movement.”

Bail caught her arm, dragging her enraged gaze back to him. “It was your movement too, once upon a time.”

“That was before I realized what a bunch of two faced cretins you all turned out to be. Remove your hand, Bail.”

“Please don’t do this, Padmé.”

“Then give me what I want!”

There was an underlying anguish in her hard tone; the desperation of a mother too long separated from her offspring. Yet, despite that, Bail and Mon couldn’t — wouldn’t — give in. Too much was at stake to risk the lives of innocent children no matter how much pain it caused her.

“They are safe,” Bail told her softly. “Is that not enough?”

Padmé tore her arm from his grasp, and her hand dropped back to the butt of her blaster. “Never.” Turning away from her two former colleagues, Padmé walked away.

“Padmé.”

She didn’t stop.

“*Padmé!*”

She paused, but didn't look back. "There isn't anything you can say that would interest me, Bail."

"Why do you turn the Jedi over to us if you don't agree with what we're doing?"

He'd caught her attention. Her back stiffened for a fraction of a second before she finally turned. The look on her face could only be described as embittered. "You've managed to keep my children's whereabouts secret from me for over a year and a half. You've managed to avoid capture and any incriminating evidence that would allow you to show your faces on Coruscant. Everyone *knows* you're a part of the Alliance, they simply can't prove it. Who better to keep the Jedi from Vader than those who are capable of keeping a mother from her children?"

Neither Bail nor Mon flinched, though it took an effort of willpower on both their parts.

Padmé's words were full of hatred and bitterness, a poison that had eaten through her once pristine shell of conviction and left behind disillusion and despair. It didn't help that they were involved in it up to their necks and had helped encourage it. What they hadn't expected was for Padmé's drive to recover her children — and to extract revenge on the man she blamed for it all — to have carried her so far, for it to turn her against them; for it to leave her jaded, a shell of her former self.

If the Padmé they remembered was still somewhere inside, she had been buried and smothered under layers of resentment and pain.

"And now you see things my way." Padmé's harsh final words ended the conversation and she turned.

They made no move to stop her as she walked away from them, her back straight, her steps the ground eating stride of the determined. Mon Mothma placed one hand on Bail's shoulder and squeezed. "Let her go."

Bail took one last look at Padmé, noting how — as she approached the ship — the embrace of the man who waited was the first thing she turned to. There was no last look cast over her shoulder, not a single glance in their direction to see if they still watched her. She likely knew, but her words had made it plain.

She didn't care.

Shaking his head sadly, he finally turned away and departed with Mon Mothma. At least they'd tried.

Month Twenty Two, Day 13 PEF

Chapter 8

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor*] — Orbit around Kashyyyk — Month Twenty Two, Day Thirteen PEF

Vader's fleet had entered the Wookiee's home system less than two hours previous, doing nothing to hide their presence or their intention. Imperial outposts along the way hailed the fleet, sending them updated system status reports and a current evaluation of the Wookiee home world, Kashyyyk.

Things had been quiet in the month and a half since the destruction of the research facility. There are been no uprisings, no razzings and little dissent from the citizens; almost as if they believed that good behavior should absolve them of responsibility for the station's destruction.

Vader believed otherwise.

"Admiral."

"Yes sir?"

"Order all ships to target the main population centers of the Northern Hemisphere."

"Yes sir."

Darth Vader stood, a stationary statue, by the main view port out the front of his bridge. Asajj Ventress, his silent shadow, stood several feet behind, her hands loosely resting on her lightsabers. Penetrating blue eyes swept the planet and fleet lay out as the Admiral relayed the orders. Clones, every last one of them, manned the consoles from end to end of his bridge. They reacted as ordered, without qualm or question and were willing to die for the Empire without thought.

The Fleet moved into position, encircling the upper half of Kashyyyk, their turbo lasers targeting the areas assigned. Vader waited, his hands folded behind him, one finger absently tapping the back of the other — it was the only movement visible to those on the bridge.

"The fleet is in position, Lord Vader."

Vader turned, his crystal eyes meeting those of the Admiral. "Ten minutes of bombardment, Admiral — then begin landing your troops."

"Yes sir."

Dismissing the Admiral with a wave of his hand, Vader turned to Asajj as the batteries of the ship began to open fire. "Come with me."

They swept from the bridge, heading deeper into the corridors and away from the visual of the assault. Vader was silent, offering no explanation as he led her towards the turbo lifts at the far end of the corridor. Her curiosity peaked, and envious of his presumed intention, Asajj was unable to stop herself from voicing the obvious question.

“Are you joining the assault?”

“We,” he didn’t so much as pause, “are joining the assault. The troops you commanded on your raid on Riflor are awaiting you in hangar bay alpha.”

“Wookiees are not exactly the foe I had expected the first time you allowed me back to battle.”

The look he slanted her caused his eyes to glint with something akin to amusement. “You do not consider your... *training* a battle?”

“Not in the way you mean.” Her words were grudging, seething from between her teeth at his reminder of where they’d spent the better part of the last month. When he hadn’t been throwing her around the training mat, he’d been insatiable in other ways... ways she hadn’t dared deny him — or herself; and she hated them both for it. She attempted to steer the conversation back on the track she’d intended. “Wookiees are not a difficult foe.”

“They would tear your arms off given the opportunity.”

“How is that different from my present company?”

Vader laughed unexpectedly at her barb, taking no offense. “Your arms, more specifically your *hands*, have better uses, my apprentice.”

The doors to the turbo lift that would take them to the hangar bay opened and Vader stepped in. Asajj went with him, turning to face the door as she did and straightened her spine. Biting the inside of her cheek and tasting blood, she struggled with the almost overpowering urge to— Her hands clenched in her split skirt with the driving need to take Vader down a notch or two. A turbo lift would have seemed the optimal place for some, but she knew if she tried to use it to corner him, he’d turn the situation around on her faster than she could blink.

“Focus.”

Jerking, not at the sound of his voice but the feel of his breath on her cheek, she didn’t look at him.

Vader almost smiled, well able to follow the train of her thoughts after the intensive training he’d put her through. Asajj was a most willing pupil — in all things — and easy to read. She craved his power; saw his position as the thing that would complete her. She saw him as a means to an ends and foolishly believed she was using him as he used her.

He intended to keep her around just to watch that particular delusion dissolve.

Straightening, he stepped forward as the doors to the lift opened to the hallway before the hangar bay. Pulling a comlink from his belt, he keyed it on, not waiting for Asajj to join him as he entered the corridor. His long strides moved him quickly beyond her. “Artoo?”

The acknowledgement that came back was also a query.

“I’m almost there. Make sure she’s prepped and loaded. How’s the hull patch holding?”

Whistles and squeals that sounded almost like a scold burst through the comlink.

“I know you oversaw it,” Vader’s tone turned almost placating, despite the scowl he wore. “And no, I don’t think you’d have deliberately botched it to ground me. I’ll be there in two minutes; just make sure she’s ready.”

The comlink cut out halfway through a rude noise from the astromech as Vader flipped it off. He glanced behind him to see Asajj palming open the door to hangar bay alpha. “Ventress.”

Pausing, she looked up, her expression carefully neutral. It was the expression she wore most around him, as if to prevent him from seeing below the surface. What she didn’t yet know was that it failed — every time. “Yes, Master?”

“Focus and control.”

“Of course, Master.”

She disappeared and he turned back to the corridor. Personnel and bots scurried to either side of Vader, careful to give him a wide berth, as he increased his pace towards the docking bay that held his fighter. He passed through the doorway just as the engines kicked in, Artoo anticipating his arrival. The cockpit was open and he leapt from his standing position directly into the pilot’s seat.

Artoo toddled a welcome as the canopy closed and the fighter shot forward before Vader had secured his safety harness. The ship rolled as it exited through the atmospheric barrier, Artoo trilling a question.

Vader snapped the last of the harness clasps in and affixed the interface to his head. His hands closed about the controls. “I have control Artoo.”

A light on the console blinked off and Vader tested the ship’s response. It danced at his finger tips, curving left and then reversing almost on its tail. Excellent.

Flipping on the comm. line, Vader switched to the main command frequency. “Get me the Admiral.”

The ensign on the other end responded without stammering and a moment later the Admiral came on the line. “Yes, Lord Vader?”

“Land the troops.”

“There are still several minutes of bombardment time, my Lord.”

“Land the troops, Admiral; I said nothing of ceasing the bombardment.”

There was silence for a moment. “Yes, my Lord.”

The bombardment continued, laser blasts streaking down from the heavens and leaving brilliant lines of fire in their wake. Black smoke could be seen, even at that altitude, snaking upwards from the cities. The shuttles holding Vader’s army chose their paths carefully, maneuvering through tracer lines to find clear air space as the bombardment continued.

Zippering back and forth across the lines, Vader was a silent shadow — a silent *motivation* for his troops to get this right.

Surprisingly, they didn't lose any of the shuttles. As they entered the atmosphere, the shuttles began to spread out, streaking between laser blasts for the optimal landing sites. As smoke and debris clouded visual sensors, the pilots turned to remote navigation systems. Vader simply allowed the Force to guide his movements, stretching out into the jungles below for his first target of the day... down... down... *there*.

"Heading mark three four, Artoo — twenty five mile. Count 'em down."

The droid complied as the ship took a steep dive and inverted towards the coordinates Vader wanted. His hands were steady on the controls as the numbers flashed by in a heartbeat. Pulling up before he'd have struck the tops of the trees, he throttled back, searching for what had caught his attention. Stretching to the Force, he used it to narrow in on the position of those below.

There.

A female Wookiee with two small cubs on her back, and a trail of youngsters following, sat almost perfectly still, attempting to blend into the trunks of the trees. Vader called up the targeting computer and zeroed in on the female — only it cut out.

"Artoo!"

Toddling a negative, the ship suddenly jumped straight upwards and slammed Vader back into the seat. The scold that blared across the ship's speakers was unmistakable.

"I wasn't going to ask you to shoot them — I'd do it myself!"

The main display suddenly lit up with the status report of his weaponry — and the fact that Artoo had disabled them completely. Another scolding noise came from the droid along with what sounded like a definitive negative.

"Fine; I'll deal with them personally."

Another series of beeps and whistles and the ship veered off, back towards their original heading. Artoo overrode the manual control until they were well clear of the area and then relinquished it — sending the ship into an immediate nose dive. Vader leveled her out as Artoo continued to jabber at him.

"Teaching future races mercy isn't what I had in mind — you must have a wire loose; I am *not* taking this too far!"

Artoo made another rude noise and then flickered the technical readout of the planet's existing military targets onto the panel to get his attention. He toddled a long string of noises that had Vader's lips firming in a hard line. The schematics of one of the facilities played out and quickly scrolled through before Vader's eyes; Artoo's way of making amends.

"Very well," Vader relented, noting that Artoo had included the fact his weapons depot of choice was also a recently discovered home of insurgents. "And this time—"

Toddling an affirmative as Vader banked the fighter towards the location; Artoo was already carrying out the order Vader hadn't voiced. Information scrolled into the ship's

computer from the planet's public databanks as Artoo search for backdoors to the defense system's registries.

Despite the planet having been under Imperial control since the outset of the war, the Wookiees were technically inclined, intelligent beings who often outsmarted their betters and strove for the personal freedoms so recently lost. The outcome of today's battle would see the race split, fractured among the stars as little more than slaves to the Empire.

Vader waited as the miles flashed by, a countdown to the location he sought slowly rolling across the screen. Artoo's chirp brought his attention back to the other side — his weapons had been reengaged and the soft hum of target lock echoed through the cockpit.

Optimal range was still minutes away.

The orbital bombardment stopped, and Artoo obligingly patched through the transmissions of the troops — in particular those of the unit Asajj was leading. The droid knew his Master was interested in her first real battle since he'd taken her training in hand, and obligingly patched through the feed from the trooper's helmets so Vader could watch.

With no fighters to challenge him, Vader turned his attention to the video feed, trusting Artoo to inform him when they had reached optimal firing range. It was a target Artoo had picked and one the droid wouldn't deny him — unlike the Wookiee and her cubs, this target was military in nature and a direct threat to Artoo's continued existence.

Asajj' image was almost a blur, the blue and green of her sabers cutting a swath in the Wookiee ranks as her troops marched through the streets. She had taken point, using her superior speed and agility to corral and destroy pockets of resistance.

Behind the troops, whenever the feed splintered to show it, came special troops with stun sticks who entered homes and dragged unconscious Wookiees into the streets. But the feed mostly remained on Asajj and the ribbon of death that marked her trail.

Vader flipped off the audio, dismissing the observations of the troops, and concentrated solely on Asajj's movements. She was a quick study, that he already knew, but to see her apply those lessons to the battlefield was something else. She showed no mercy, gave no quarter; the slightest hint of resistance was eliminated — permanently.

He'd taught her well.

Increasing in volume, the targeting tone overrode the other sounds inside his cockpit and drew his attention back to the matter at hand. Artoo began counting down the seconds until optimal firing solution and finally, the facility came into view. Just as the tone solidified, a holo of his Admiral appeared on the screen.

"Lord Vader."

Vader released the projectiles, sending them blazing across the sky in a direct line of fire that wouldn't miss and veered away. "What is it, Admiral?"

"A priority message sir, from Dantooine."

"Excellent."

"It is... not good news, sir."

“She’s already dead then?”

“No sir. Disappeared — like the last two. Our agents were able to find no indications of how or why she suddenly disappeared. She’s simply vanished.”

Rage simmered to his finger tips and Vader opened his hand to Force choke his admiral — but the man was worth his weight in experience and hadn’t rescued the Jedi, simply delivered the bad news. His hand folded back around the flight stick and tightened before sending it careening back towards his flag ship.

“Recall Ventress and have her meet me in my office. I want everything you have on the way the Jedi escaped transferred to that computer immediately.”

“Yes sir. Shall I send the orders to continue the search?”

“Focus on the star port and the incoming and outgoing vessels. Perhaps one of them can give us a clue as to the identity of our prey.”

“Yes sir.” The admiral’s image winked out.

Vader swore, long and fluently, in the half dozen languages he knew, slamming his hand down into his thigh lest he break something important. “Artoo, call up everything we know on the Jedi Hunter and transfer the data to my personal network. Once we’re inside, you’re to connect and correlate. He’s made a fool of me for long enough.”

Artoo tootled an affirmative as Vader pushed the fighter to the maximum speeds, zipping across the heavens like a shooting star. His hands dancing across the controls, Vader focused on flying and pushed the craft to its limits. Once landed, he’d have enough time to worry about the tactics the Jedi Hunter was using, always spiriting Jedi away from under his nose. Once landed. For now he focused on the flight and the pleasure of pushing the craft beyond its performance specifications. When he landed there would be time enough.

“You sent for me, Master?”

Vader waved Asajj to the chair in front of his desk as he continued to pour over the information Artoo had organized for him. There was a pattern in what information they had, a minor one to be certain, but a pattern none the less. “The Jedi Savior has struck again.”

“Where?”

“Dantooine.” Vader called up the information and spun the monitor so she could see it — and the pattern to it. “It would appear that our little friend has been busy.”

Watching silently, Asajj noted the detail that had been added to the map, her stomach clenching for a reason she couldn’t yet fathom. Something about the information made her uneasy.

He tapped another series of keys, bringing up a map of the galaxy, the planets of the rescued Jedi in yellow. “These are the planets where I had intended to... visit. They are numbered in the order of where Jedi slipped away before my attack.”

Asajj stepped closer, having declined to sit, and scrutinized the screen. Her face gave away nothing as she checked the dates the Jedi were discovered missing. A niggling feeling began at the back of her mind, but she ignored it for the moment. “Do we know how this *savior* is getting them off planet?”

Vader tapped another key and the picture changed again. “This is a list of worlds known to harbor Alliance sympathizers. From what the recon droids have been able to patch together, the Jedi is loaded onto a short range transport, moved to a major hub and then disappears into the crowd. They are always met, before disappearing, by someone on the list of two thousand.”

“Risky for them.” The respect in her tone was grudging. “Harboring Jedi is a capital offense.”

“One you can enforce if you’re able to connect the missing Jedi to their home worlds.” Vader tapped another series of keys and the itinerary of the disappearances came up again, Asajj’s feeling returning full force. “These are the dates, in order, where the Jedi disappeared. The dates in red are my estimated date of arrival on planet. This Jedi hunter lands three days before my date of arrival and is always gone when I arrive.”

The words “no one is that lucky” seemed to echo through the room despite not having been spoken. Asajj considered what she knew of the dates, of where she’d *been* for some of those dates, and drew the logical and damning conclusion.

“They downloaded your files.”

“So it would seem.” For someone whose security had been breached, Vader didn’t seem overly concerned. He shut off the screen with a flick of his fingers and leaned back in his chair, his gaze blatantly assessing as it moved from the top of her head and down over her body. “And it would also seem that you acquitted yourself well on Kashyyyk.”

Asajj remained still, refusing to react to the blatant look in his eyes. “I have trained hard, Master.”

“Yes; you have.” Vader pushed to his feet. “I have business that requires I stay with the fleet. Track down this Jedi Hunter, Ventress, and bring him to *me*.”

Biting the inside of her cheek, she resisted the urge to simply tell him she’d deal with the Jedi Hunter herself. The niggling suspicions that had risen in the back of her mind refused to be quieted and if Vader was willing to allow her the freedom to investigate — away from him — she would take it. “As you wish, Master.”

Vader opened a compartment on his desk and pulled out a comlink. It had no markings and looked like a cheap knock off. He fiddled with it a bit, setting the frequencies as she waited to be dismissed. Finally satisfied, he extended the unit to her as he stepped around his desk. “Keep this on you at all times. When I call, do not keep me waiting.”

She stepped forward to accept it. Vader caught her fingers as they closed over the comlink and pulled her forward with a violent tug. Resistance wasn’t even considered as his hand snaked about her waist, bruising the flesh as the hand around her fingers released to dig into her shoulder as she was brought flush against him. Vader’s lips were on hers a heartbeat later, bruising flesh and causing her teeth to cut into her lip.

He didn't notice — he never did — as he lifted his head, his eyes glittering dangerously. "Fail me and you'll wish I had killed you back on ZJ7."

Pulling away from him, she glared back, the comlink almost collapsing under the strength of her grip. She eased it, taking a deep breath before straightening her spine and hissed, "I already do."

"You only think you do, Ventress."

Turning on her heel, she departed and it was Vader's dark laughter that followed her out of his office and down the corridor. It was a sound that would linger in her memory and promised worse fates than what she already suffered.

Asajj would not fail him.

Month Twenty Two, Day 18 PEF

Author's Note: My co-author **Daenarra** has written an accompaniment vignette for this story detailing how Max came to work for Padmé. Anyone interested should check out her profile. You can find a link to her in my **"Favorite Authors"**.

Chapter 9

Padmé's Office, Secret Base — Month Twenty, Day Eighteen PEF

"This," Padmé pointed to a crosspiece on the detailed hologram that floated above her desk, "is the main conduit that runs power from stem to stern. Backup generators and systems are here, here and here. Our focus is going to be the generators; without them, the systems will be easier to eliminate."

A press of button changed the hologram, revealing the next level of the ship. "Our main corridor of attack will be straight forward. To infiltrate we'll need four sets of coveralls, which have been acquired, and the access codes from the system — which you've already got." She checked her notes before continuing. "The Alliance members don't use slaves or aliens to do the dangerous work, so humans walking through the inner corridors won't be all that strange. They also rotate the work crews, so someone new won't be out of place. Syr, Kila and Umil, will branch off at these points; their objective will be separate from my own with the intention of eliminating the backup generators. I'll go after the central core myself."

Max stretched out, watching the briefing with silent eyes, assessing and processing the data, looking for any flaws in her plan. "What if you're recognized?"

"It's a risk, but unlikely. A former Senator isn't one who knows much about the inner workings of a Star Cruiser."

They shared a smile before Padmé continued. "I'll need you to open the shielded blast doors at these locations," several dots appeared on the map, "as I reach each one. There are no clearance codes available and the cycle system for these is a half an hour each. We don't have that kind of time."

"It'll trigger alarms."

"That's what the virus is for. I'll access the main service terminal here," she pointed to the map. "Once you've gained remote control, dump the virus into the system and use it to infect the subsystems list you've got. Once the sub systems are incapacitated, they should begin to randomly malfunction."

"You're placing a lot of faith in a 'should', Padmé."

"If Asajj was available it would change the equation, but she's not here and I don't have a choice but to go ahead with what we know. Their security systems and personnel are minimal — other than that series of restricted bulkheads, there are no major access point security systems."

"I don't like it; I should be going with you."

"And what, Max? Program any resistance to death?"

"I do know how to use a blaster." His response was dry. "I don't just sit and slice *all* the time."

"You're more useful to me here."

"I still think I should go on this one. There's no one to watch your back in case things go wrong."

"You'll be monitoring the interior sensors and Threepio will be linked to my comlink to help with any translations issues."

"That makes me feel so much better."

"At least he follows orders."

"And I don't, is that it?"

"You're pushing Max."

"Only because that golden monstrosity is a security risk, you shouldn't keep him around!"

"He's a risk I'm willing to take."

"You might be, but what about the rest of us? There are three other people going on this mission, don't you think they should have a say in it?"

"No!" She snapped the word, stalking over to stand in front of him, and glaring down. "This is my operation; my call. They all knew it when they signed on and every last one of them is allowed to leave if they choose!"

"That's still no reason to put good people at risk because of a two bit, obsolete piece of machinery!"

Padmé looked as if she'd been slapped. "He is *not* obsolete! Threepio is the only other being around me who's *seen* my children! *The only one*. Having him here makes me feel closer to them — I thought you understood that."

They stared at one another and Padmé turned away, presenting him with her back as she placed her hands flat on her desk in an attempt to reign in her anger. Her chest hurt, squeezing, from the wound Max's words had inflicted. Silence descended between them, the object of their discussion silently continuing to monitor the ship's systems across the room and — for once — not joining the conversation.

Max's hands slid around her hips and the gentle pressure drew her backwards and into his lap. "I'm sorry," murmuring the apology; he nuzzled the back of her neck. "I do know this is hard for you, Padmé, I don't mean to imply otherwise. And I do understand — forgive me?"

Closing her eyes, she allowed his words to sooth her senses as his touch eased the pain momentarily. It wouldn't last, but it did reminder her that she wasn't alone. "You're forgiven."

"Mistress Padmé!"

"What is it Threepio?"

The droid shuffled towards them as Max set Padmé back on her feet. "A fighter just docked, it is—"

"Hello Padmé."

"Asajj!" She whirled, surprised to see her friend. "Where have you *been*?"

"Hello to you too," the Force adept replied dryly as she strode into the room. Her stride was slightly less easy than Padmé remembered it, the usual split skirt, dual lightsabers and knee high boots lending a hint to normalcy toan over tunic she'd never before worn. Padmé took in the odd picture even as Asajj finished speaking. "I'm doing well; how have you been?"

"Asajj."

"Max." Asajj nodded to the slicer before turning her attention back to Padmé and the holo behind her. "It would appear that I arrived just in time."

The hologram on the table continued to rotate and flicker, the access points Padmé had highlighted. The whole plan was laid bare for Asajj's scrutiny — until Padmé flicked the holo off with the touch of a button.

"Or not." Asajj arched her eyebrows and crossed her arms over her chest. "A raid I'm not invited on?"

"A raid we didn't know you'd be around for," Padmé corrected. "Where have you been?"

"Remember that old friend I ran into on ZJ7?"

Padmé blinked in surprise. "Must be one hell of a friend to keep you away."

"Let's just say that my friend insisted." Something flickered in Asajj's eyes for a moment before disappearing. "I never meant to make you worry, but I wasn't anywhere that I could contact you safely. You understand."

Padmé hesitated. She *did* understand, but something about Asajj's story and appearance didn't ring completely true. The Force Adept was hiding something. "I do understand, but I also don't want to compromise the safety of my people. *You* understand."

Asajj lifted one hand and flicked her finger. The hologram reappeared on Padmé's desk, shifting and rotating slowly as Asajj's gaze moved over it. Padmé clicked it off, but it immediately turned back on, and this time the command to shut it off didn't take. Asajj circled around the hologram slowly, her eyes taking in the details as Padmé crossed her arms over her chest.

"Been practicing?"

"I've had incentive." Asajj's eyes never left the hologram. "Alliance?"

"A new cruiser," Max supplied, braving Padmé's wrath. "It's supposed to be a secret."

"Not secret enough," Asajj stepped closer, peering at one of the under sections. "Looks under-staffed."

"Understaffed and under secured," Padmé admitted grudgingly.

Asajj wouldn't allow the hologram to be shut down and appeared to have every intention of joining their little party. A part of her was glad to have her back, but a little voice in the back of her head was echoing Max's sentiments from when Asajj had disappeared. Was the Force Adept here to sell her out to this mysterious friend? Was this going to become a trap — but for Padmé and not the Alliance?

Finally flicking off the hologram, Asajj stepped back from the desk and one hand absently reached up to pull the collar of the over tunic away from her neck. "A solid plan, Padmé. Infiltrate and destroy?"

Padmé nodded.

"Excellent!" Asajj's eyes gleamed with anticipation. "Then we'd best hurry if we're going to fit that timeframe."

"Where do you think you're going?"

"With you, of course."

"No way." Padmé sliced both hands through the air before landing them firmly on the table top and shooting a hard look at Asajj. "I can't risk it, Asajj."

"Risk what?" The look on Asajj's face was unreadable, but something sparked in the depths of her eyes that Padmé couldn't quite grasp. "Having me along to save your neck?"

Something in Asajj's tone was almost dangerous, but Padmé did catch a flash of indignation — and hurt — that she'd think Asajj capable of such treachery. Especially on a mission where Asajj would not only be useful and an asset, but one in which the Force Adept would enjoy herself. She did ever so love destroying the toys of both warring factions.

"Are you here to sell me out?"

Asajj met Padmé's gaze squarely. "I am not."

"How can I believe you? You've been gone for over a month — how do I know you won't betray me?"

"You don't." Asajj told her bluntly. "But I didn't return empty handed and I have information you're going to want. Once the ship is destroyed, it's yours."

"What information?"

There was no mistaking the near fanatical gleam in Asajj's eyes. "Regarding a certain Sith Lord you — we like to make trouble for."

"You aren't honestly thinking of doing this, are you Padmé?"

“Yes, Max, I am.”

“She’s been gone for a month, you said it yourself — anything could have happened in that time.”

Asajj crossed her arms over her chest. “My drive to derail the pretender’s plans has not changed, Max. You, however, are smart to question my motives.”

“Are you saying he’s right?”

“Let’s just say that my... *friend* would have a vested interest in ensuring this particular Alliance project didn’t come to fruition if they were aware of it.”

Making a snap decision, Padmé turned to Max, “Is she backup enough for you?”

Max rose to his feet. He didn’t look pleased, but he didn’t object again. “She’s backup enough for you; that’s all that matters, isn’t it?”

“Alright, Asajj, we leave in one hour. Just... don’t go running off this time when everything is said and done, okay?”

Max led the way out of Padmé’s office, Asajj turning to follow him. “I will stay as long as I can, Padmé.”

“Asajj—” Padmé reached out, taking a step to grab her by the shoulder.

Asajj hissed, flinching in obvious pain as Padmé’s fingers dug lightly into the fabric of the over tunic, rolling away.

“Are you alright?”

“Fine.”

“You don’t sound fine, Asajj.”

“*I am fine*, Padmé.” Asajj cast her a dark look, reaching up one hand to adjust her tunic.

But Padmé wasn’t buying it; Asajj had reacted too violently to the sudden touch. Her hand darted out, grasping the fabric of the tunic and giving it a sharp pull. It slipped down, far looser than anything Asajj normally wore, and exposed a length of white skin from neck to elbow — and the vivid imprints of finger tips in ugly purple and black circles along the back edge of her shoulder. A fainter, less visible and healing yellow bruise stood out in stark contrast at the base of her neck. By the collar that sat low over Asajj’s collar bone and now upper part of her chest, there was another yellowish mark that had faded to almost nothingness. It looked as if the Force Adept had been pummeled.

“By the Force!” Padmé breathed, shocked. “Asajj, what *happened* to you?”

Pulling the tunic back up, the Force adept cast a glance towards the doorway Max had passed through. “The price of my escape. It is nothing, Padmé.”

“Nothing? You should be in a bacta tank!”

The immediate shake of Asajj’s head vetoed that suggestion. “They’re just bruises.”

“It looks like you were grabbed pretty hard, are you sure?”

“Call it... a reminder. Ignore them, Padmé, they don’t involve you.”

Padmé stared after Asajj as the Force Adept turned and departed, her skirt swishing against her boots in silent statement. Asajj neither wanted nor needed Padmé’s help — or so she believed.

The unsettled feeling in Padmé’s stomach was back. Never before had Asajj been reluctant to discuss her injuries — or the method in which they’d been inflicted. True, most of those discussions had revolved around Asajj’s delight for displaying her battle scars — or rather, lack thereof. Bruises were a common occurrence on skin as pale as hers. But these... these were of a brutal nature Padmé had never seen. Whoever had inflicted them was someone Asajj didn’t care to identify.

Padmé’s stomach turned over, clenching almost violently. She would have to keep a closer eye on her... *friend*.

Mon Calamari, High Orbit — Month Twenty Two, Day Nineteen PEF

Near silence covered the dock yard as Padmé’s team stepped into one of the space transports from the main facility. Max, settling himself comfortably at the co-pilot’s controls, plugged in his slicing kit and, with a few clicks had the engines kicking in. Padmé stood behind as Threepio piloted, using his ability to mimic voices to request clearance for flight to the *Freedom’s Queen*. There was a bust of static before the tower came back.

“Shuttle one, this is tower. We have no maintenance scheduled for today, please transmit your schedule and credentials.”

Max tapped on his keyboard, sending over the requested files.

Threepio got back on the comm. “Tower, this is a snap inspection to ensure working conditions adhere to the current standards.”

Two acknowledgements clicked and then silence from the other end left those in the cockpit exchanging looks. Asajj, covered in a voluminous cloak, her cowl pulled low, settled into one of the passenger chairs behind the command seat. Padmé settled in behind Max, her hair pulled back in a pony tail, a worker’s cap pulled down over her forehead with the regulation coveralls hanging slightly off one shoulder. Syr, Kila and Umil were similarly attired and had already strapped themselves in back in the main bay. Their gear was stored, the team prepped. Tension mounted at the continued silence of the tower — hurdle one.

The tower finally came back onto the comm. *“Shuttle one, this is tower, you’re cleared for launch.”*

“Shuttle one confirms.” Threepio replied. “Good day, Tower.”

“Safe skies, Shuttle one.”

Threepio clicked off the comm. “Was that really necessary, Mistress Padmé?”

Leaning forward, she patted his shoulder. “Yes, Threepio. You did fine.”

Max muttered something she didn't catch under his breath as the Shuttle launched from the pad and veered smoothly towards the cruiser that was nearly completed. Silence reigned in the cockpit, a testimony to the nature of their mission. Only the sound of Max tapping on his slicing board was audible above their breathing as Threepio guided the shuttle into the designated landing bay.

"Showtime." Max spun his chair about and unhooked a transmitter from the top of the pad, extending it to Padmé. "Plan this on one of the consoles. It'll allow me to get the remote access we need."

"We've done this before."

"Practice makes perfect." Max tugged on it, not releasing the transmitter. His index finger slid up the outside of her fingers, caressing once before finally he let go. "Be careful out there."

Padmé rose to her feet and flashed him a grin. "Just get those bulkheads open, and it'll be a walk in the park."

"Ya ma'am." Asajj rose to her feet and disappeared into the back, both Max and Padmé watching her go. Max lowered his voice. "Keep an eye on her and watch your back."

Padmé's smile slipped away and she patted one pocket. "I intend to."

Departing the shuttle, the five, led by Asajj, made their way to the hatch way. Atmosphere was already established inside the ship and they had no problems moving through the initial "security" lines of one droid examining their credentials. Max's handiwork paid off without so much as a bump and they were in.

Syr, Kila and Umil split from Padmé and Asajj, disappearing at the pre-appointed location towards the backup generator spots. Padmé had Asajj keep a watch out as she knelt by one of the mid-corridor consoles and pried off the cover with a vibroknife. Keeping time in her head, Padmé counted off the seconds as she worked on the wires. It had been one of the first tricks Max had shown her when he'd first joined her crew and she used them now to hook in his transmitter. As the time clock ticked down towards zero, Padmé carefully reconnected the wires and reaffixed the exterior panel. Wiping her hands on her coveralls, she sheathed the knife and stood.

"Alright, let's go."

Asajj fell in behind her, a silent shadow as they traversed the hallways. Tapping her collar with her tongue, Padmé activated the comlink sewn into the lapel. "Max?"

There was static for a moment before his voice, soft but clear, came back. "Here. Good job; I'm in."

"Start clearing out the people and set your virus."

"Syr and Kila have reported in. The backup power stations aren't guarded at all, just video surveillance."

"Taken care of?"

He made a rude noise, as if to say “you have to ask” and continued. “Umil’s transmitted indicates he’s nearing his target. You’ve got the tough nut on this one.”

“I planned it that way,” She slanted a glance back towards Asajj. “I even brought an extra nut cracker.”

“Just make sure she’s gunning for the same target you are.”

“Will do. How far?”

“Sixty meters. This corridor ends with a service shaft in ten meters around a blind corner.”

“For a hacker you’re a pretty smart guy.”

“For an ex-Senator you’re one hard headed female.”

She stifled a laugh. “Why’s that?”

The mike crackled before his transmission came back. “Sorry, static barrier. What was that?”

“Nothing.” Padmé turned the corner and almost bumped into the dead end Max had mentioned. “I’m at the service shaft.”

“Take it down one level and out. Once there, the virus should begin working its way through the subsystems.”

“You take courses on Map reading?”

Max’s laughter was soft and mellow in her ear — relaxing. “No, why?”

“You’re the only man I know who can read one accurately.”

“Lotsa practice, boss. You down that shaft yet?”

Padmé ran her fingers over the hatch cover — and paused. “Bump number one. It’s magnetically sealed — is there another way down?”

“Not on your timeframe.”

She cursed; nobody ever magnetically sealed maintenance hatchways — why would they start now? “Alright, hold on a minute. Asajj?”

“Something I can do for you?”

Padmé stepped back around the corner. “I’ll keep watch — we need to get through that hatchway.”

Asajj pulled one of her lightsabers from under her cloak. “Discreetly?”

“If you can — we don’t want to be discovered until *after* we’ve set the charges.”

The Force Adept inclined her head and went around the corner. Padmé ducked her chin to her collar. “How’s the area, Max?”

“Clear for now; this is a pretty dead work zone.”

“A trap?”

“Doesn’t look that way.”

“This is too easy, Max.”

“Maybe on your end. Hold on, I’ve got a roadblock on mine.”

Max’s transmission cut off abruptly just as Asajj looked out from the corner. “We’re in.”

Padmé sent a silent thought Max’s way to hurry and get through whatever trouble he was having before she reached the magnetic doors. She and Asajj entered the service hatchway, activating glow rods as they did to light their route. Carefully climbing down the ladder, they ensured the door was closed behind them and that they made as little noise as possible. Without the glow rods Padmé would have missed the landing off the side, tucked back into one corner, that accessed the restricted level. She climbed down beyond it and stopped.

“Asajj?”

The Force Adept looked down in inquiry, mindful of the need for silence. Their eyes locked and then Padmé deliberately looked at the platform and then back. Asajj smiled darkly, nodded, and stepped onto landing. To Padmé’s amazement, she didn’t pull her lightsaber; instead she placed both hands on the hatchway lock — which was on their side — and *pulled*. There was no sound and Padmé couldn’t see exactly what Asajj was doing to it, but suddenly she moved back a step and stopped. Kneeling, Asajj placed something on the ground and then turned to Padmé with a beckoning motion.

Padmé had to jump from the ladder to the platform and landed lightly, catching the wall for balance. The lock from the door lay on the ground at Asajj’s feet, a piece of twisted and flaky metal. Padmé bent, to examine it, but Asajj caught her and pulled her back to her feet with a shake of her head, pointing to her wrist.

Checking her timer, Padmé cursed softly and nodded, straightening to push the hatchway open. Asajj stopped her once again, a hand across the hatchway and then placed her ear to it. With a wicked smile, the Force Adept closed her eyes.

Charges from *something* seemed to crawl up Padmé’s spine as Asajj gathered herself for something large. Then, with a sudden burst of movement, *pushed* forward. The hatch cover shot outwards, taking down two individuals who were on the other side of it and knocking them into the opposite wall. The force of the impact likely killed both instantly, but Padmé didn’t have time to check as they crawled from the hatchway.

One minute until Max was supposed to activate the fist override and everything would get that much more difficult.

Max’s voice crackled back across the lines. “You’re running out of time, Padmé.”

“I know, any brilliant ideas?”

There was a pause and then, “Have Asajj cut your way through the walls.”

The idea was so simple — they weren’t stealing the ship, simply trying to destroy it — she’d missed it completely. “Remind me to reward you later.”

“Count on it.”

Padmé grinned at the heavy suggestion in his tone and then turned to the Force Adept. “We’re out of time, Asajj. Clear us a pathway?” She looked pointedly at the wall.

“How far?”

“Max?”

“Yeah?”

“How many rooms?”

“You’re on the sublevel just above the main generator. Seven walls, one floor in the last room. I’ll track your progress from here. Five minutes and counting Padmé. If the charges aren’t set by then, get out.”

“Copy.” Looking back to Asajj she nodded to the wall again. “Seven walls.”

Asajj’s blades whirled into motion, cutting through the wall easily and making no effort at stealth. Sirens began to blare, indicating a hull breach and warning all personnel to evacuate — Max’s handiwork. Padmé ignored them, jumping through the holes as Asajj cut them; they were deep enough into the ship that whatever resistance they encountered would be light. With the ship on hull breach alert — and a moment later slipping into reactor overload — there would be precious little left in the form of personnel.

Another wall was punched through as Padmé checked her timer. Three minutes left, three walls and a floor to go. It would be close. As is sensing the urgency, Asajj seemed to accelerate, her swipes becoming faster, the lightsabers punching through the walls like carbon paper. They practically raced for the last wall, Asajj going to work on it as Padmé double checked the pack she carried for the explosives.

The wall hit the ground and they were through before the dust settled. The humming of the lightsabers echoed through the room as they dived downwards, entering the floor with little finesse. There was no time if they wanted to be able to plant them and get out intact.

The sound of the floor dropping away reverberated through the room as the lightsabers did their work quickly, and Asajj jumped down the hole before Padmé could stop her. The sound of lightsabers whirling into ready — and deflecting blaster bolts — echoed up through the hole. Asajj’s confident yell came back a moment later.

“If you are going to arm that charge, now is the time!”

Padmé swung the pack to the floor and flipped open the lid. She glanced into the hole and then ducked back with a grin. Asajj’s cut had been just off center so they were almost directly over the main power core. When she dropped the backpack, it would almost directly on top of the core — impossible for anyone except a Jedi to retrieve. And the Alliance had no Jedi working on this ship. She knew; she’d checked.

The charge set easily, already having been primed, as Padmé dialed the count down timer.

“Padmé?”

“A little busy Max!”

“We’ve got company; get out of there!”

Padmé replaced the timer in the bag and sealed it. “Incoming, Asajj, get out of there!”

Asajj came flying back through the hole in a Force assisted jump, curling into a mid-air flip as the blaster fire ceased and Padmé’s charge went flying into the rift. Padmé didn’t wait for Asajj to regain her feet, or for the charges to go off. She turned and ran back the way they’d come.

Asajj’s return played a key role in the success of their mission to eliminate the Alliance space dock and cruiser. Upon their return to Padmé’s base, Asajj kept her word and fed the information she’d brought with her on Vader’s scheduled movements to Padmé. There was no harm in doing so — Vader himself had given her leave to use any methods necessary to obtain his objectives — and knowing Padmé, Asajj was certain the former Senator wouldn’t be able to follow through on her oft expressed desire to see Vader dead.

Not yet, anyway.

As the Force Adept settled into her quarters in Padmé’s hidden base, a plan began to form in her mind and she knew, without a doubt, what she needed to do. The niggling suspicions about Padmé’s activities refused to go away and one way or another she would need to find proof.

Month Twenty Two, Day 26 PEF

Author's Note: Welcome to the nightmare that is my life of late. I would apologize for not updating at the beginning of the month, but real life matters the last two months have been far more important than fanfiction and that's simply how life is.

I can't thank those of you who have stuck with this so far for reading... hang on to your hats folks, things get interesting from here!

Chapter 10

Padmé's Secret Base — Month Twenty, Day Twenty Six PEF

Booted feet rested easily on the edge of the desk as Asajj scrolled through the information she'd obtained over the last week. There were over a month's worth of mission logs, reconnaissance mission reports and various bits and pieces of Intel to go through and though she was attempting to follow her normal routine to avoid causing any more suspicion.

Padmé, for all her flaws, was not stupid and Asajj would need to tread carefully. The last thing she wanted to do was accuse her 'partner' of what she suspected without proof. The mission logs had little information, though she did find a reference to Dantooine dated almost the same day as Vader's punitive attack on Kashyyyk. It mentioned Padmé having gone on a supply run.

Asajj had made a copy of the log and continued reading. She would be able to re-read them later at her leisure. Fortunately making copies of certain logs had never raised Padmé's suspicions before and they shouldn't begin to now. The last thing Asajj wanted was for Padmé to turn Max against her and slice into the database of her fighter. Max was likely a pawn in Padmé's scheme and Asajj didn't hold it against him.

Closing down the file, her feet hit the deck and she stood, stretching her hands up towards the roof of her quarters. Something snapped in her back, releasing the tension and she grimaced, rubbing her hands over her lower back; too much sitting and not enough action. At least with Vader she'd— with a snarl she banished the thought. That was *not* what she wanted.

The bruises on her shoulder, neck and collar bone had faded to nothingness. A little help from the Force and her recovery had been complete. That no one had bothered her, and had pretty much left her to her own devices, had given her the time and space necessary to use the Force for such a simplistic but vital matter. She didn't want Padmé asking more questions and with the evidence gone, the former Senator would be less likely to broach the topic.

Striding from her room, she headed for Padmé's office, focusing on the supply run Padmé had taken to Dantooine instead of her "friend's" less than cordial husband. There were a few

things about that log Asajj wanted clarified. Among them, Padmé was supposed to have picked up new boots for her the next time they'd hit the small hub of activity.

Asajj paused outside Padmé's office, finding it locked and telekinetically undoing it, before slapping the hatch opening panel. The door slid open and she stepped inside, taking in the sight before her with indifference.

"Is this a bad time, Padmé?"

Padmé jumped from Max's lap, whirling on the door as she straightened her clothing, adjusting her skirt with hasty motions. Asajj crossed her arms over her chest as Max turned the chair away from the doorway and Padmé smoothed her hair. Asajj's eyebrows arched.

Interesting.

Vader would be so pleased to know another man was taking his place, just as Asajj was taking — Asajj flinched away from the thought and turned her gaze to an indignant — and breathless — Padmé.

"Couldn't you knock?"

"My apologies," Asajj's dry apology lacked sincerity. "I have some questions about what has been happening since I... left."

"Everything's in the mission reports."

"Not quite everything." Asajj twirled a data rod in her fingers. "There is mention of you going to Dantooine—" Was it her imagination or had Padmé stiffened at the mention of the planet's name? "-but no manifest of your return cargo. I seem to recall a vested interest in that cargo."

Padmé's posture relaxed almost immediately — no, she hadn't imagined it. Not a good sign.

"Vested... oh, your boots!"

"You forgot."

"You had disappeared, Asajj, we didn't know if you were coming back."

"I will always return for that which interests me." Straightening, Asajj smirked and inclined her head. "Forgive the interruption; please, resume your... activity."

Padmé gasped as if she'd been slapped, but Asajj didn't heed it as she turned on her heel and stepped back into the corridor. A wave of her hand as the door closed and engaged the lock before she headed for the hangar bay. She'd been seen very little in the last week, but those who'd approached her expressed reserved gratitude at her timely return. It helped that Padmé had made a point of informing everyone of her role in the destruction of the Alliance ship.

It was time to see just how far that gratitude extended.

Mouth agape, Padmé started at the door as anger warred with amusement and embarrassment. Her face felt warm but she knew she wasn't blushing — not yet.

"Well, that's that."

Her gaze dropped to where Max was still sitting in her chair, his state of disarray the same as it had been when Asajj had walked in. He hadn't bothered to straighten or fasten his clothing and it lent him a rather roguish look. The urge they'd been satisfying returned, but she firmly clamped it down.

"Straighten up, Max."

He shrugged and began to do as she asked. "She's acting like normal, you know."

"Other than barging in here when the door is locked."

"She's showing off." Max finished on the buttons of his shirt and tucked the tails into his unfastened pants before standing to redo the fasteners. "Asajj is more powerful, more controlled, than when she left."

"I noticed." Padmé rubbed her forehead. "Are you sure she's not acting out of sorts? Not spying?"

"Nothing I've been able to find. She's been going through our mission logs mostly. Copied a few of them for later study and taken a look at our route — or rather, since the last wipe. The same Asajj."

"Nothing? No transmissions to this friend of hers, no data streaming?"

"Nope." Max finished straightening his clothing and stepped towards her desk. Using her computer, he connected to the bank of surveillance cameras throughout the base. He zeroed in on Asajj almost immediately. She was on the hangar deck, talking to some of the maintenance crews. She was being almost sociable, her stance still aggressive but she appeared to be listening with great interest to whatever the crew had to say. He frowned. "That's odd."

"What?"

Max tapped the keys and zeroed in on Asajj — and the fact she still wore her lightsabers on her belt. "Doesn't she usually lock them away?"

"Usually." Padmé sighed. "I bet it's because I questioned her loyalties. She probably thinks I don't trust her."

"But you don't."

"I know." She made a face. "But I shouldn't have told her that."

"Maybe not, but it's too late now." Max's attitude was typically carefree. "On the bright side, she's been known to be able to keep personal information to herself."

"Until it's of use."

Max chuckled and snaked out an arm to slide around her waist, dragging her unresistingly into his arms. "And what use would she have for our little affair, hmm?"

Padmé slid her arms around his neck, allowing the want that was yet to be satiated to return to the forefront. “Nothing that wouldn’t get her killed I’m sure.”

“Hmm,” Max placed one hand low on her back and pressed her lower body into his, leaning down to nip at the curve of her jaw. “I know the feeling. Still want me to monitor her?”

Her head tilted backward with a soft sigh. “Maybe later, Max. Much, much later. I have a promise to keep.”

Padmé’s Secret Base — Month Twenty Two, Day Three PEF

“With the information Asajj gave us, plus some of our own Intelligence, we’ve been able to pin point a major ship yard being constructed at Bilbring.” Padmé pulled up the map of the facility that was obviously under construction — and newly so. She inclined her head to the silent Force Adept and continued. “This will not be our next objective — it’s half way across the galaxy and there are nearer targets — but is will be a future objective. Our current objectives are going to be two fold. First, we’re going to gather intelligence on the movements of the local government on Yaga Minor. Asajj, this is your assignment. You’re to shadow, and record their locations for a week. Without knowing where they’re taking their so-called political prisoners, we can’t stage a prison revolt and send it into chaos.”

“And the second objective?”

“We’ll discuss it after you’ve brought back that valuable Intelligence.”

“And Max is unable to do this?”

“I’ve got another assignment, Asajj,” Max informed her easily. “Something that doesn’t involve shadowing men who’re twice my age and have more blood on their hands than Darth Vader.”

Asajj barely managed not to flinch at the sound of his name — and all it conjured. It was a reminder she *didn’t* need of why she was there. Padmé, too, stilled at the name, but her anger was an almost palpable thing as she slammed her hands down on her desk. “*Nobody* has more blood on their hands than Vader,” she informed him coldly. “*Nobody*, understand?”

Max held his hands up in a placating gesture. “It was an analogy, albeit a bad one — relax.”

Padmé closed her eyes, seeming to fight for control as Asajj watched her intently. Anger seemed to emanate in waves from the diminutive woman and Asajj was fascinated. This woman had stood up to Vader — and from all accounts lost everything because of it. Yet, it hadn’t stopped her and Asajj could understand why. Inside the tiny woman beat the heart of a warrior, a woman who refused to accept defeat.

A twinge of remorse struck Asajj and it was ruthlessly squashed. Padmé would be able to handle Vader; she had her own problems to worry about. Not the least of which was find proof of her suspicions about Padmé’s real quest.

Max broke the tense silence, speaking directly to the Force Adept. “That prison will have several layers of software security, Asajj, so you’re not going to want to follow the old codgers inside. You’ll want to wait outside where you can see them. We don’t need to know who’s behind the bars, so to speak, we just need to know the location of them.”

“Full recon would be the number of prisoners, cells and guards with the possibility of a facility layout.”

“I can tap into the system later,” Max assured her promptly, sliding a glance back Padmé’s way. “Unless you had something else in mind?”

“Maybe.” Padmé’s concession was slightly strangled before she picked up the conversation again, her tone as hard as the look in her eyes. ‘We know that His *Lordship* will be in these systems within the next two weeks.’ The map zoomed out to illuminate the systems on one side of the Galaxy. “His intended stops are these three planets, in particular this one, though we have yet to learn why.”

Padmé was lying. Asajj knew it as surely as she knew why she was lying. It wasn’t a feeling, or a sense in the Force, it was the gleam of anticipation, the almost fanatical desire that shone in Padmé’s eyes to derail Vader’s plans. The planet’s name was obscured, but the star chart Asajj knew well. She’d seen it before in Vader’s office — not unlike this one — with swirls around it indicating a coming target; Padmé was going after a Jedi Vader wished eliminated.

Clenching her hands in the fabric of her skirt, Asajj narrowed her eyes at Padmé, taking in the appearance of her so-called friend. The skirt that had been present the first week of her return was gone, replaced by the no-nonsense trousers Padmé liked so much. A blaster sat comfortably low on one thigh, a new addition to her attire since she’d never come armed to these meetings before.

Not that Asajj had either; she simply felt more secure with her blades than without — Vader had seen to that.

Padmé continued to expound on her plan, putting together a timeline for when all of the necessary data would be needed, both from Asajj and from Max, and proceeding into the general strategy for the assault on Yaga Minor. The prison they were setting to destroy and liberate was also the one place the Empire housed politically dangerous opposition before execution.

Who knew who they’d find.

None of that, however, concerned Asajj. While Padmé spoke, the Force Adept blocked out her words and concentrated on what she was seeing, rather than hearing.

Body language.

Line of sight.

Force impressions.

All of these things filtered to Asajj as she sat watching. Waiting. Observing as Padmé attempted to divert their attention from the real object of her quest. The world of Toydaria and the Jedi who resided on the planet in supposed secrecy. Burning hatred spread through Asajj’s

gut, threatening to tear loose in some form of rash action. Her gaze narrowed on Padmé and she zoned back into what the other was saying in time to hear her stutter, surprised by the vehement look on Asajj's face.

With difficulty, Asajj reigned in her emotions and masked them, tucking them away deep where they would eventually be called on for power and speed. She pasted a bland look on her face, drawing on reserves of good feeling. She had only suspicion and action on Padmé's part; no real proof. But the *thought* of someone she called *friend* turning on her — true or not — was almost enough to send her into a rage.

Almost.

"Is there a problem, Asajj?"

"With your plan? Rarely. What kind of timeframe are we looking at?"

"The trip to Yaga Minor will take two days and I'd like you to get a good picture of the overall situation so the longer you're there the better. Just... don't overstay your welcome."

"I try not to. When are you planning the attack for?"

"Three weeks.

"And the Bilbringi attack?"

"Empire Day. If I... if we can wipe out a potential super ship yard in its early stages, the Empire will be set back in their construction by years. It gives us roughly two months to plan since the outline for the prison uprising is pretty much finished — I just need details. Are you going somewhere?"

Asajj was already on her feet and turning towards the door. "I thought I would do some research about Yaga Minor. It is one of the planets I have not spent much time on."

"Oh." Padmé smoothed one hand over the controls, allowing the holo to disappear. "I was... hoping you'd join me for caf — so we could talk about your mission."

"Another time."

The door closed behind the Force Adept without a sound and Padmé cast a look at Max. "Was it something I said?"

"Don't look at me. How soon do you need that information you asked me for?"

"The sooner the better. I want to hit Toydaria after Asajj leaves so we're finished well before she returns."

"Then I'd better get cracking."

"If Asajj follows her regular pattern, she'll take two days to prepare before taking off for her mission. That should give you the time to slice into Vader's database and get me the information I need."

"Cutting it a little close this time, aren't we?"

"So I'll improvise. If I can mess up Vader's plot to kill this Jedi, I will."

Max reached out to smooth an errant strand of hair behind one ear. “I’ll get you what you need.”

“Thank you, Max.”

“I’ve got a *great* incentive program.” He winked at her and then sobered. “Try not to be alone with Asajj, would you?”

“I’ll do my best. You’d better get cracking if you want to beat his new security protocols.”

“Done and done, boss lady.”

Max ducked out as Padmé turned back to the hologram and reactivated it. “Threepio?”

“Yes, Mistress Padmé?”

“Any luck uploading that language to the portable translator?”

“The implementation of the transfer was a relatively easy process, however, there are one or two small variations I must program to correlate the information correctly.”

Her eyes remained glued to the diagram that floated before her — and the trajectory of the large “V” that was Vader’s Star Destroyer. “Will it be ready in two days?”

“Oh yes, that will be ample time to complete the device.”

“Good. Keep at it and get what help you need from Max.”

“I am afraid he does not like me very much.”

Padmé laughed softly, and finally turned to look at the droid. “Don’t take it personally, Threepio. *I* like having you around and my opinion is the one that matters.”

“Of course, Mistress Padmé. Your translator will be ready on time.”

“Thank you, Threepio.” She turned her attention back to the hologram, her expression hardening for a brief moment before her fingers slid decisively across the panel and tapped into the overall map she had of Toydaria. Settling into her chair, she placed her boots on the table in an unconscious mimic of Max’s normal posture and examined the map thoughtfully.

There was little time to plan this rescue mission — but she’d thought of that too. Calling up a passworded file on her computer, she tapped into it and sat back to read. Bare boned plans were logged into her personal files and kept separate from the main computer system to prevent an intrusion. In these files somewhere was the basic plans on how to successfully evacuate someone from Toydaria — she just has to find it.

Padmé’s Secret Base — Month Twenty One, Day Six PEF

“Are you sure you have everything?”

Asajj checked the supplies in her fighter; she was travelling light to avoid getting entangled when she finally landed on Yaga Minor. “Are you sure this ID code will get me in free and clear?”

"It's Max's work," Padmé informed her pointedly. "He's not gotten you caught yet, has he?"

Asajj darted an unreadable look at Padmé but didn't answer. Instead, she changed the line of questioning. "Any luck confirming the information I brought you on Bilbringi?"

"Max was able to tap into the files this morning. I don't know who your friend is, Asajj, but they're certainly well connected."

"My friend has sources available to them that are fairly extensive." Understatement of the year. Asajj settled into her fighter's cockpit and checked the crash webbing. "Will the transponder codes still be the same when I return?"

"Three frequencies off; that protocol hasn't changed."

Asajj nodded. "When I return then."

"Happy hunting."

Nodding once, Asajj flipped the switches to close the canopy, forcing Padmé to step back or lose her fingers. She saluted silently through the viewport before igniting the engines to the fighter. Padmé stepped away, moving back to where Max and Threepio waited and lifted one hand in farewell. Asajj mimicked the maneuver, silently urging her friend to stay on the ship and not to confirm her suspicions, before turning the fighter to the electromagnetic barrier between them and space.

The fighter shot forward, straight through the invisible barrier, and out into space.

Padmé dropped her arm and turned to Max. "Give her a two hour head start, and then we begin. Threepio?"

"Yes, Mistress Padmé?"

"Prepare the shuttle for launch."

Both moved off to do her bidding, well aware that Padmé was not comfortable with the timeframe, but her desire to throw yet another hydrospanner into Vader's plans overriding other considerations. Under ideal circumstances, she'd have waited for Asajj to be gone a full twenty four hours before even considering attempting to land on a planet where a Jedi Vader sought was in hiding. Under ideal circumstances. But there was still the need to make contact and convince the Jedi of the need to disappear once more. The Alliance transport was already set up, it was just a matter of getting the Jedi to it.

Padmé left the deck to change; it was almost show time.

Asajj hid in the interference from the sun at the edge of Padmé's sensor ranges where everything became nonsense on sensors. Dialing everything down to conserve power, she left only life support and minimal thruster capabilities with everything else on stand by. Her sensors were on focused long range, a risk but a necessary one, if she was going to see anything leaving the main ship that constituted Padmé's base of operations.

To Asajj's knowledge, Padmé had always had a mobile base — some place that could and did easily escape detection and entrapment. Mostly, she was certain, in part to Max.

Time passed slowly as the rhythm of the thrusters compensating for the slight shifts for the solar activity found the most economical way of doing so. The first hour was uneventful, and Asajj used it to browse through the logs she'd brought with her, cross referencing the data and a quick picture of where the group had been, where they were going to be and the gaps where they supposedly hadn't been. Putting together a partial timeline of Padmé's activities, she knew then that if she wanted a complete one, something to fill in the gaps, the failsafe she'd installed in the main nav computer on board Padmé's vessel in her first week working with the former Senator would need to be accessed.

It was a backup memory bank, a redundant looking system that was rigged to record all of the flight data — but not to erase it when the memory core was wiped. In fact, the system went dormant during a wipe to avoid detection and only booted up again after the memory search for files was complete. It had cost Asajj a small fortune in credits, but she'd felt the need for a life line then.

Until her last meeting with Vader, she'd been contemplating removing it — or revealing its existence to her partner. Now... now she would need to access it for the full information on Padmé's activities. There was still a chance — a slim chance — that Padmé was not doing what Asajj suspected her of doing, and those logs would either damn her or clear her.

A beep from her sensors drew her attention away from her display and she checked the IFF signature on the ship.

Neutral.

The nondescript shuttle had left from Padmé's base of operations barely moments ago, headed for the hyperspace exit point that would allow a jump to Toydaria. Padmé's boat; one she'd nicked from Corellia's merchant sect on one of their first missions. It'd undergone a serious overhaul, had its memory wiped and — once they'd acquired Max — new programming installed.

A nice little ship.

Heading, however, in the exact direction Asajj had both feared and anticipated. Her gut clenched as she saw red, her hands tightening on the flight stick and squeezing as she resisted the urge to send the fighter screaming after the shuttle, blasters blazing. Taking a deep breath, she cleared the blood lust from her eyes, allowing a clearer vision and the possibility of being misinformed. There were several systems accessible from the hyperspace point to which the shuttle was headed.

Powering up her fighter gave the shuttle time to disappear into hyperspace, and Asajj time to find her calm. The fighter emerged from the Sun's shadow, streaking towards the hyperspace exit point as Asajj uploaded the coordinates for Toydaria into the navcomputer. Giving the computer time to process the information and set the correct course, Asajj punched in the connection codes to the main base's nav computer — and uploaded the commands for the nav computer recorder module.

The data transfer took two minutes and finished just moments after her own navcomputer finished computing the safest route to Toydaria. She hit the hyperspace levers, noting the

travel time of just over an hour, and brought up the information she's just uploaded from Padmé's main navcomputer. Using the computer's multi-function abilities, she brought up both files — those she already had and the new ones — and set the ship to correlate the information. Within it, she was certain, she was about to find out that the woman she'd called friend was nothing better than a no good, backstabbing, under handed sneak.

All of the facts pointed to it; if Toydaria was in fact her destination, it would be the final nail in Padmé's coffin.

Sensors came on at full as Asajj emerged from hyperspace and began an immediate sweep of the surrounding heavens. Ahead of her, acting just like the rest of the traffic, was the nondescript craft she'd seen so many times in the Hangar bay of Padmé's hideout. Her lips thinned into a straight line as she curved away from the planet, sending the fighter into a wide arc as she flipped a switch to reverse the course she'd just travelled — with a minor alteration.

Vader's flag ship, the *Exactor*, was in a nearby system, headed on a lazy course towards Toydaria. She'd intercept it and fill him in on just what his *wife* was up to.

Month Twenty Three, Day 8 PEF

Chapter 11

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Three, Day Eight PEF

Asajj's return to Vader's flag ship drew an immediate summons to his office the moment the cockpit opened and she stepped out of the fighter. Acknowledging the summons, Asajj took a moment to collect the information she'd obtained — and the conclusions she'd drawn before slipping the data rods into her belt pouch. Making her way to his office, not bothering to detour by her quarters, she fairly vibrated anger and contempt. If he wanted to summon her immediately, he could deal with the smell of her from being in the cockpit. If nothing else, it should keep him away — for the moment.

Vader was leaning back in his chair, one finger absently tapping on the desk top as he reviewed something in his files when she entered. He waved her to the chair she never took, and continued to read. The skin around his eyes tightened as he read something he didn't like before slapping the monitor off with one hand and looking up to pierce her with a direct look. It promised pain if he didn't like what she had to say.

"This had best be good."

"I have located the Jedi Hunter."

Vader sat straight up, his lethargy and annoyance vanishing immediately. A gleam of something akin to pleasure flashed through his eyes — or maybe it was avarice. Asajj wasn't sure there was a difference. "Excellent! Where is he?"

Asajj let the question pass, certain she'd be answering it in a minute anyway. "I have also located your... your wife."

"Padmé!" Vader was on his feet in an instance, his earlier pleasure about hearing about the Jedi hunter overshadowed by news that had only been half hopeful of ever receiving. His eyes narrowed dangerously as he placed both hands on his desk and leaned forward. "Why isn't she with you?"

Asajj kept her back to the door even though she knew it would offer no more than a momentary escape. Vader would find her no matter where she went on his ship and if she ran her punishment would be all the worse. "There has been a complication, Master."

"I'm listening."

"Padmé is the Jedi Hunter."

Vader arched his eyebrows. "I am in no mood for jokes, Asajj."

"It is no joke." Reaching into the belt pouch at her waist she pulled a datarod from inside and tossed it in his direction. Disgust and loathing filtered into her tone as she spoke. "It is all

there; she is the one who rescued the Jedi Leena Krebo on Dantooine just as she has rescued a dozen others.”

Vader caught the datarod and turned it over in his fingers. “And what is this exactly?”

“The personal logs of one Padmé Naberrie,” Asajj spat the name.

Vader was over his desk and had her up against the wall a moment later, his hand around her throat. “That’s my *wife* you speak of, Ventress. I suggest you show some respect.”

“As you do?”

His fingers tightened and Asajj’s breathing began to come in gasps, her fingers shooting up to claw at the back of his hand. He waited until her eyes began to roll back in her head — and then released her. “How I show my wife respect is none of your concern.”

Asajj crumpled to the ground, going down on one knee as she gasped for breath. A testament to her new skills, she was able to control the gasping as she used the Force to minimize her pain and help her get the most out of the air she was taking in. On the third gasp, she was back in control.

“How did you obtain this log?”

“I know Padmé; until you recruited me on ZJ7, I was her partner and considered her a friend.”

Vader looked doubtful. “And you failed to inform me until now?”

“I did not know she was rescuing Jedi.” The Force Adept fairly spat the words as they hissed through her teeth venomously. “If I had known, I would have killed her on the day we’d met.”

“You had best explain your accusation, Ventress, or I *will* kill you.”

Asajj got to her feet, swaying only once before finding her balance. She met his gaze squarely. “What do you know of your wife, Master?”

He stepped back and half-sat, half-leaned on the edge of his desk. “She is alive.”

“I mean, what do you know of her activities?”

Vader raised his eyebrows. “She’s a member of the so called Alliance — a founding member, and in league with them.”

Asajj rubbed her throat with one hand, already feeling as if the bruises were jumping forth from underneath, and chose her next words carefully. “You have been... misinformed.”

“Have I?”

“Padmé is *not* a member of this so called Alliance and never has been.”

“I was in the Chancellor’s office when Padmé put forward the petition of the Two Thousand. I would call that accurate first hand information.”

Ignoring his dry tone, she continued doggedly. “The Two Thousand were those who conceived of this so called Alliance, but they were not the ones to birth it. With the rise of the

Empire, the Alliance was born — at around the same time your wife began targeting Empire and Alliance depots, training facilities and research centers.”

Vader crossed his arms over his chest; it was clear she had his attention. “Is that so? And you said you work with her.”

The sharp nod she gave him spoke louder than any words she could have spoken.

“What is it the two of you do and however did you hook up with an idealist like her?”

Asajj crossed her arms over her chest. “She saved my life at Carida.”

“Carida...” Vader murmured the name softly, as if trying to remember the incident. “I seem to recall an attack on that training facility almost a year ago.”

“Eight months.”

Rolling his wrist, Vader indicated she was to continue.

“I had tracked one of your recruits to Carida as he had played a part in the destruction of my world.” The tightness in her tone was indicative of her reluctance to speak of it, but she didn’t dare leave out the details “I had planned my attack carefully — but something went wrong. During my attack, another group — another *individual* had planned to attack the same outpost but for different reasons. I later learned she chose it for its high visibility as a target. My mistake was in thinking I could eliminate one individual and escape unscathed.”

“And did you succeed in your mission?”

“You know she did not!”

“You, Asajj; did you kill the individual you were after?”

“Of course.”

“And what, you let yourself be cornered?”

“I was undisciplined and impulsive, Master,” the words were clipped and grudgingly offered, catering to his ego and feeding it since she knew he expected to have to fight with her to get her to admit weakness. “I had planned only to enter the facility and obtain my revenge. I expected to be able to leave with little resistance.”

He laughed once, harshly. “And you claim Padmé was there?”

“In attempting to wipe the database, she hit the safeguards and activated the internal alarms. She caused enough of a diversion to give me an opening to slip free. We left the training center together; she had a plan for escape where I did not.”

“Padmé’s always had a plan.”

“So I have discovered.”

“And when you discovered her identity?”

“She did not exactly advertize herself as your wife.” Asajj’s smile was almost nasty. “But I knew of you and your *relationship* with her; I intended to kill her and I believe she was aware of it.”

“And why didn’t you?”

“She made me an offer.”

“An offer you couldn’t refuse,” Vader shook his head. “Still the politician.”

“A disillusioned one if at all. Your wife asked me to aid her in her quest for vengeance — against *you*.”

Vader arched his eyebrows in surprise but said nothing as Asajj continued.

“Padmé is openly and vehemently against you, Skywalker—”

“Watch your insolence.”

—she does not even bear your name and openly states her husband died in the formation of the Empire. The moment I realized what she was doing and why — and did not believe she owed allegiance to either side — I believed I could work with her. She does not believe in the Empire, nor does she believe in how the Alliance is attempting to undermine it. For a once passive Senator, she is surprisingly blood thirsty.”

A frown crossed Vader’s lips. That wasn’t how he remembered his wife. “She’s been attacking both sides?”

Nodding towards his desk, she looked pointedly at the datarod. “That datarod contains information on the raid *you* called me away from. Her tactics have much improved from that first raid, as have her contacts.”

“Something you helped her with no doubt.”

“We both despise you; I had no reason not to help her.”

Vader smirked. “Such motivation. I don’t recall another attack after Carida for almost three weeks, what did you do in the interim?”

“Padmé suggested we take on an Alliance outpost. They have done something she cannot forgive — but she has not confided in me as to what that is. Her political views and theirs do not mesh. To my knowledge they have tried to recruit her multiple times — I have never been present for these meetings — but she is always in a fouler mood when she returns and plans a larger and more pointed demonstration for them.”

“And you say you don’t know why?”

“No, Master. Nothing. She has not chosen to confide in *me*.”

Bitterness laced Asajj’s words and Vader heard the unspoken. That wasn’t all Padmé had declined to confide in her supposed friend and Asajj was feeling the betrayal of confidence keenly.

Asajj continued without being prompted, getting to the point of her visit. “On that datarod is a list of all the places she has been, including every world where a Jedi has been rescued. The only one missing is Sec Tarn on Toydaria from yesterday.”

Vader’s eyebrows hit his hairline. “Indeed.”

"I followed their shuttle from Padmé's base. They were descending into Toydaria's atmosphere when I reset my course and came here."

"That's not proof, Ventress."

"It is!" She all but snapped the words at him, forgetting her place in her near-blinding rage. "Padmé is the Jedi Hunter; she has been on every planet in the time frame set by the Jedi Hunter, *bar none*! If you do not believe me, go to Toydaria and see. You will find your prey has slipped the snare!"

"Don't think I am not considering it." He regarded her critically. "You were not aiding her in rescuing Jedi, then just what goal do you work for — against the Empire — if this little group doesn't support the so called Alliance?"

"Your elimination."

Laughter sprang from between Vader's lips, a sound of disbelief. "Really?"

"So I believed. Given the opportunity I would have driven a lightsaber through your gut, but Padmé believes you are *her* responsibility. We have laid in wait when you descend to obtain a Jedi only to find them gone and Padmé swore to me she would kill you with that rifle of hers."

"Yet, I'm still alive."

"She lost her nerve!" Asajj spat the words out in disgust. "The woman who professes to hate you more than I do cannot pull that Force forsaken trigger."

"Indeed." His eyes gleamed with something akin to pleasure — or perhaps it was simply ego. Asajj realized her error a moment later when he continued. "And you never got behind the trigger?"

"I was the bait."

"Yet, I'm still alive." He repeated it smugly, crossing his arms over his chest as if in challenge.

"Sticking around is never in the plan. Padmé *assured* me she would do it this time. The last time she was tempted to try and set a trap, I declined. She has been unable to kill you before, I do not believe she would kill you now no matter the circumstance."

"Even now that you are betraying her to me?"

"Even now." Asajj shook her head in disgust and anger. "The Jedi... I never knew about. She deliberately kept me in the dark, going behind my back to rescue those she knows I despise. She lied to me, deceived me and played me for a fool, believing I would never discover her secret."

Rubbing his fingers together absently, Vader turned what she was telling him over in his mind. He gave no other outward signs of his inner turmoil at Asajj's words; he'd become a master of hiding what he didn't want subordinates to see. *His* Master, on the other hand, would likely have picked him apart in moments. Padmé's name on Asajj's lips had thrown him off balance; he hadn't really expected the Force Adept to find her where he had failed.

And to find out that Asajj had been working with her for almost a year — well... it would take some time to sort through it all.

“Get out.”

Asajj inclined her head and disappeared, the door to his office closing silently behind her.

With the Force Adept gone, his mask slipped and his hand clenched into a fist. A whole year, wasted! His *wife* had been actively and destructively seeking ways to discredit him! Yet, even as the rage poured through his system, and the sense of betrayal festered, he couldn't help but be proud of her. That attack had started the rumor of her survival; it was why he remembered it. And her tactics had improved exponentially over the course of the last eight months. Padmé had learned, and quickly, the best ways to get under his skin and cause problems for him with his Master.

Her little group was the thorn he couldn't remove.

Vader left his office, retiring to his chambers. The connecting door closed with barely a whisper of a sound and he strode directly to the viewport, planting both hands on the sill as he stared out at the stars. The data rod sat under the left one, a tangible proof to Asajj's testimony — or so she claimed — and one he would verify. Padmé's personal log, enough to get her killed — swiftly — on any Empire controlled world if she were captured.

Padmé.

Within his reach, just outside of his grasp, tied to the one person in the entire galaxy he'd have never believed her capable of teaming up with. Beeping from his comlink echoed through the room and with the wave of one hand he turned it off. He had no wish to be disturbed, not while processing the information Asajj had given him.

His Padmé was the slippery fish that eluded him, the savior of Jedi he would have dispatched without qualm — only he hadn't known it was Padmé.

Why did she resist his call? Why did she refuse to come to him? He'd built something of himself, for them. He taken risks, braved dangers — all for her. He'd become more powerful than any other Jedi and none could stand against him, not even his former mentor. Asajj claimed Padmé wished him dead. He didn't believe it. His Padmé had loved him completely and totally, the proof of their love had manifested itself in the shape of their child.

His fingers tightened on the sill with the thought, a thought that had not occurred to him before. Their *child*!

No report he had received from Asajj or his spies had told him of a child in the midst of any hostile group. Had she hidden his son or daughter from him? Left him or her with trusted friends? Did Padmé keep their son or daughter hidden in plain sight, in her quarters with a nursemaid? Or was it simply that Asajj did not know of a child because Padmé had not chosen to enlighten her ally?

Vader didn't know and it angered him — almost as much as Padmé's quest to humiliate and eliminate rather than join him.

A stirring in his blood brought him back to the present and he felt the need to work through the emotional turmoil in a physical manner that had nothing to do with his wife. A

wave of his hand activated his comlink. “Ventress.”

It took a moment before her voice came back. “Yes, Master?”

“The practice salle, two minutes; bring your weapons.”

“Yes, Master.”

—————*~

Vader ducked under a snap kick and hit the mat, rolling backwards to avoid the blue blade diving towards his head. Red crossed blue as his lightsaber picked off the attack at the last second and he regained his feet. On the defensive, Asajj’s green blade almost scored a hit, going so far as to singe the shoulder of his tunic before he threw her and her attack back.

The Force Adept landed in a ready crouch, her lightsabers weaving a deceptively mild defensive pattern. “You seem distracted, Master,” she purred viciously. “Day dreaming of silken skin against yours?”

Anger surged through him. Not from her taunt, but because the barbed comment hit the mark; he *was* distracted. Distracted enough to allow her to get the upper hand momentarily. Focus returned with the resurgence of his rage just as Asajj moved in to take advantage once more.

Ready for her this time, he parried one blow before sending her careening backwards with a violent force push. She stumbled, unprepared for the blow, her cocky smile slipping.

Vader stalked towards her, using his speed to close the gap before lifting his blade for an attack. Asajj parried his first blow, but couldn’t the second and was forced to give ground. His lightsaber dipped, catching both blades in one past and with an enraged surge threw them out wide. One slipped from her grasp and Vader encouraged it, ripping it from her to careen harmlessly across the room. The second blade dropped barely moments later and he stepped in close, pinning her in one corner.

Asajj didn’t back down, standing her ground until the last possible second — and then attempted to duck away.

Shooting out with lightning speed, Vader’s hands gripped her shoulders — dropping his blade to the ground forgotten — and slammed her into the wall. His favorite place for her. A half step brought his body flush against hers and caused her to stiffen. “My *distraction* is none of your concern. All you need worry about is whether or not I allow you to live once Padmé is with me.” His eyes glittered dangerously, a wealth of foreboding implication in his words. “Do you understand?”

Asajj flinched as his left hand shifted, his index finger lifting to her face — and then sliding down her cheek in a mockery of a caress. She tilted her head stubbornly, her eyes filled with disgust as her chin jerked in a single nod.

A low chuckle feathered across her cheek as he leaned in. “Do you have an objection, Ventress?”

“My *opinion* on the matter means nothing.”

“You don’t like my touch?”

“It disgusts me — but I know better than to complain.”

“Yet, every time that we’ve been together you’re response has been anything but disgusted. One might even call it... *enthusiastic participation*.”

“You ktah!” Without thinking, Asajj moved to strike him, his mockery striking a discordant note in her pride.

Vader didn’t move, but her hand was flung backwards a moment before it could connect to be pinned against the wall. His fingers shifted, thumb and forefinger digging into her cheeks as he gripped her face in a brutal grasp. “It would be wise for you not to attempt that again. You seem to forget I have your life in my hands.” His free hand shifted from her shoulder into a bold caress down her body, leaving little doubt to his train of thought even as his eyes smoldered with rekindled lust. “Your body too.”

A shudder ripped through her frame, both revulsion and anticipation as humiliation made her eyes burn with indignation.

Smiling nastily, he squeezed once, painfully, before releasing her face and turning to walk away. “We depart for Toydaria in fifteen minutes; don’t be late.”

The moment the door closed behind him, the pressure against her body eased and she was able to stand on her own two feet again. Shaking with something akin to relief, she continued to stare at the door, unable to believe he hadn’t ordered her submission once more and burning with rage.

Padmé!

This was all her fault! The sooner she was brought to Vader, the sooner *she* could tend to his marital needs and Asajj would be left — hopefully — in peace. There was no telling how often, between now and then, Vader would call on her and she *imagined* it would be less than before. His distraction might just work in her favor.

Stretching out her hands, she called her lightsabers back as her eyes narrowed at the door. A malevolent smile spread across her lips; Vader didn’t understand what he was in for. It would be fun, once Padmé arrived, to watch him squirm.

Until then, Asajj was his pawn — his play thing. She was subject to his whims and whimsies — the current one to investigate the report on Toydaria. Unwilling to risk his wrath further for one day, she left the training room and headed for her quarters. There was just enough time for a sonic shower though she doubted any amount of time would ever wipe the imprint of his hands from her body.

Month Twenty Three, Day 9 PEF

Chapter 12

Toydaria — Month Twenty One, Day Nine

“You’re not going to believe this.”

Padmé looked up from where she was tying down the last of the supplies they’d acquired from a contact in the main city. Threepio was already tucked safely into the cockpit ahead of them and they were just about ready to head back to base. “Believe what?”

Max tapped a few keys on his compupad. “Guess who’s on his way here.”

“Someone I know?”

“I should say. Vader’s telemetry’s changed; he’ll be in orbit this afternoon.”

Padmé froze.

Vader.

On Toydaria.

“He’s early.”

“By a day.”

“But... early!” Padmé scrambled to her feet and reached for the overhead racks where she kept the sniper rifle Max had ‘acquired’ for her, knocking over one of the yet to be secured crates in the process and spilling the contents. “If he’s early, we can set up a trap; we can finally kill him.”

“Padmé—”

Not heeding the warning in Max’s tone, she flipped open the secret compartment that housed her rifle and pulled the case from its snug hiding place. It was a highly illegal prototype and one she’d spent hours practicing with to ensure she could use it properly. Her hands shook as she laid it down on the seat and flipped it open. “This is the chance I’ve been waiting for, Max. I can finally end this — I can finally pay him back for everything he’s done to me!”

“He’s landing this afternoon according to the databanks on his ship. That’s not enough time.”

“How much time does it take? I only need to find a place above and out of sight from where Sec Tarn was living with a clear line of sight and it’ll be over *today*.”

“It’s too fast.” Max snapped the compupad off and turned to face her completely. “It’s not his pattern; something is wrong with this.”

“The only thing wrong is that we’re wasting time arguing when we need every second to set this up.”

“Padmé, it’s *dangerous*. Vader is landing in less than six hours; it’s not enough time to set up everything we need.”

“So he’s a day early — it means he *dies* a day early.”

“If you can pull the trigger this time.”

She jerked as if slapped, her expression darkening as her tone chilled considerably. “Take Threepio and take up a standard orbit with the rest of the merchant traffic. Exactly ten minutes after you see Vader’s transport leave the planet, land five kilometers to the north of the township. I will meet you there.”

“Padmé—”

Snapping the case shut, she hefted it and turned a cool glare Max’s way. “I *will* kill him, Max. That monster is responsible for my children being taken away from me. I will make him pay for it.”

Max closed his mouth. Nothing he said or did would sway her — she had the tone and stance he knew so well. Padmé had made up her mind and was determined to follow this through, even if it cost her everything. “Five klicks?”

“Don’t be late.”

“Be careful and watch your back.”

Padmé nodded once, sharply, and then departed the shuttle.

Max watched her leave, shaking his head as he did and slapped his compupad across his thigh. Vader’s demise was practically an obsession for Padmé and one he should have known she wouldn’t pass up the opportunity to accomplish. He shouldn’t have said anything. If he’d simply left well enough alone they would have been safely on their way back to base before Padmé would have known about Vader’s premature landing.

Heading for the cockpit, Max flicked open the compupad and examined the data he’d sliced from Vader’s files. He didn’t like it, not one bit. Vader’s patterns were something they’d always counted on. That he was now changing them, arriving a day early and throwing off their plans... it felt like a trap.

Yet he knew, even as he settled in next to Threepio and began to program in Padmé’s instructions, there was nothing he could do to dissuade Padmé from this course of action. She was bound and determined to eliminate Vader. Nothing he would say would change that. And, to be honest, he really didn’t mind it — normally. Providing she wasn’t walking into a questionable situation where she put herself at risk more than necessary.

For the moment, he would simply have to trust her judgment and follow her getaway plan. There was little more help he could be and none that she would accept.

Padmé hiked away from the shuttle practically fuming with outrage, her stride purposeful, the sniper rifle case firmly in hand.

How dare he? Max knew this was her purpose, her drive. She desired to see Vader dead more than anything — well, almost more than anything. If it came down to a choice between seeing Vader dead or obtaining her children, she'd have happily disappeared into obscurity with them. Unfortunately, it wasn't a choice she was being offered nor seemed to be forthcoming anytime soon.

As she walked, Padmé reviewed what she knew of Toydaria and the township where Sec Tarn had been living. He'd been harder to convince than Leena and it had taken every ounce of her considerable negotiating skills to persuade him he really was in danger. Some Jedi seemed to have more arrogance than brains, believing they were right in all things.

Sec Tarn had chosen a small township on the outskirts of a forest that led into the mountains. There were several places in that direction she'd spied when walking in the first time and any one of them would have done — except that Vader would likely be expecting a trap from that angle if he suspected one at all.

What she remembered of Vader, of his habits, dictated that despite not expecting a trap, he'd likely scan for one anyway — at least in the most plausible of locations. So the mountains *and* the forest were out. The layout of the township along with the map Max had provided her was still on her datapad and she pulled it out as she moved beyond the docking facility's boundaries and into the main city.

There was less than six hours for her to arrive in the township, set up her trap and execute it. Six hours, half of that would be transit time as she covered the ground. She *should* have had Max drop her off, but this was the easiest way to avoid notice. That, and there would be no fresh engine signatures in the area for anyone to record. It meant half the time once there to do her set up, but it also gave her three hours to figure out exactly how she wanted to set this up.

Killing Vader before he realized another Jedi had slipped away was an option, but it wouldn't be nearly as satisfying. Far better to wait until he'd exited Sec Tarn's home and ordered his troops to spread out and search. Yes, that would be more satisfying. Not only would she have the victory in knowing that Vader had failed in achieving his objective, but she would be able to kill him while he contemplated that defeat.

The hike wasn't as rigorous as it had been the first time she'd walked it the day before to see Sec Tarn. Whether that was because of *why* she was headed in the direction, she didn't contemplate. Simply walking, anticipating the victory that was soon to be hers.

Even as she allowed that information to lift her spirits, a niggling voice in the back of her head asked if she could do as she'd promised. Could she really pull the trigger this time? Had she become not only a terrorist, but an assassin, capable of robbing another human being of their life, especially *this* human being? Could she do as she'd promised and rid the Galaxy of a monster?

That doubt was what she fought against the entire way to the village, stopping on the outskirts and locating the home Sec Tarn had built. Rotating on her heel and pushing her doubts to the back of her mind, she rotated around, scanning the surrounding area away from

the forest for a vantage point. Three came immediately into view and were just as quickly discarded.

None of them boasted the defensive features she believed as a must for an assassin.

A quick search of the township itself highlighted two taller buildings — both three stories higher than Sec Tarn's dwelling, and near enough to provide a line of fire. Checking her chrono she noted that almost four hours had passed, leaving her barely enough time to find her perch, let alone set up for it. A cursory look at both buildings and Padmé chose the one furthest from Sec Tarn's old abode. It was further away, but had the most direct line of sight... and the largest windows.

A knock on the door brought the owner of the home — which turned out to be a bed and breakfast — to the door. She was welcomed with a slight twinge of speculation that was quickly put to rest when Padmé inquired if the woman could give her a room to freshen up in and catch a nap... and supplied the credits to pay for it without haggling.

Once inside, Padmé secured the door and placed the case holding her rifle on the bed. She did as she'd told the proprietor and freshened up first, taking five minutes to wash her face and hands and to swish some water around in her mouth.

The familiar anticipatory hum of blood in her veins, the eagerness that always accompanied the hunt — with Vader as her prey — was building at a steady pace, an eerie kind of calm settling over her as she made preparations.

First, she checked the lock on the door — and then dragged the dresser and a heavy trunk in front of it. Then she moved to the window and opened it, testing the shutters and finding they squeaked. The bed and breakfast was a good distance from her target area, but the windows were made of reflective material and the last thing she wanted was to alert Vader to her presence.

She had no interest in becoming his next captive.

Testing the windows a couple of times, she left them open, allowing a cool breeze in. The balcony was small but well built, stone railings coming up to about waist height before a large, thick railing sprung from the top another foot. The length of metal crossed the entire balcony, lending her more cover than just the wall. It wouldn't be worth anything if Vader found her; she knew well just how high he could jump with the Force and just what kind of cruelty he was capable of.

She tested locations, finally choosing one in one corner of the balcony. Using her vibroknife, she scraped a small groove in the top of the railing where she would place the rifle. The sniper scope was non-reflective so she had little fear of it giving her away, but she wanted the clearest, most accurate shot possible.

Her hours were up before she knew it as a shadow crossed overhead, the imperial shuttle's shape unmistakable as she was pulling the sniper rifle out of the case. A quick check of the power pack showed it to be fully charged, before she placed it in the groove she'd created. Sighting down the scope, she adjusted the distance finder and then rechecked the sight.

Better.

Vader landed on Toydaria in the outlands, just outside the small township exactly as Max had informed her he would. Using the scope, she shifted the sight from the doorway height that was equal to his head, and used it to spy on the transport. Stormtroopers descended the ramp with precise military precision. Black cloaked figures, deeply hooded and one larger than the other, followed them down. Vader drew her attention immediately as gloved hands lifted in a familiar motion she recognized — one she'd used to enjoy — and drew the hood backwards.

The familiar face in profile, one she'd woken up to off and on for years caused the same emotional assault it always did when his face was revealed; anger and hatred surged to the forefront along with a longing for things that had been and would never be again. The monster in her sights had destroyed everything she'd held dear, was directly responsible for the disappearance of her children and the demise of the Republic. Without him, things would have been different.

She continently ignored the fact that, without him, she wouldn't have her children to look for.

Padmé zeroed in the scope as Vader paused to say something to his still hooded companion, his expression easily readable through the distance recorder. He seemed to be gloating. Her fingers tightened against the trigger fractionally as her sight zeroed in on his forehead and coalesced into a clear shot. The image shook suddenly and she inhaled deeply, reminding herself to breathe even as she relaxed the pressure again.

Patience, she counseled herself silently. *The time isn't yet right.*

Vader had only just exited the shuttle. He had yet to stride arrogantly through town and into the home where he expected to find a Jedi Knight. A Jedi Knight that would be conspicuously absent with the Jedi Hunter's trademark message waiting for him.

It was always entertaining to watch Vader after reading one. He didn't know that Padmé wrote them herself with the direct intent to insult and damage his ego. That he emerged far more irate then when he entered could have been attributed to the fact that he hadn't found the Jedi he sought, but something told her it was the messages that got under his skin.

The messages *she* wrote to taunt him.

Following the progress of the procession, Padmé verified their destination and then turned her sight back to the doorway and checked the rifle one more time. She wanted no screw ups, no chance for things to go wrong. Repositioning the rifle, she checked the sight in time to see Vader ducking into the house where Sec Tarn had been living. The other cloaked figure didn't join him, and Padmé dismissed it as unimportant; she was totally focused on her mission.

Vader exited the home several minutes later, his expression stormy as he snapped an order at his entourage. She could fairly see the anger radiating from him. He cuffed the other hooded figure across the face, sending them to the ground and Padmé readjusted her sight.

Now. The time was now.

She inhaled deeply, drawing on every anger and hatred she held for the monster on the other end of her scope. It swelled in her breast, almost choking her and she had to force herself to breathe. She would put an end to this; she would terminate the foul creature who

brought such misery to so many with a single shot. Her finger tightened on the trigger as a sweat bead traced down her cheek and she forced her hands to remain steady.

Vader stood obligingly still — and then disaster struck.

Blue eyes looked her way, as if he knew she were there, straight down the scope. Eyes that seemed to reach into her soul and stop her breathing. Blue eyes the same color as Nabooian skies; the same eyes that had been filled with love and passion on many occasions. The eyes of the man who had fathered her children.

Anakin's eyes.

Padmé's heart seized in her chest, her finger frozen on the trigger, unable to finish the motion that would put an end to the monster to whom the eyes belonged. But those eyes weren't the eyes of the monster she remembered, nor the eyes of the monster who'd choked her so violently on Mustafar. The eyes she remembered had been rimmed with orange, almost glowing with hatred.

The orbs on the other end of her scope showed no such taint — no such corruption. They were clear and pure; the eyes she remembered in her dreams.

Falling away from the top of the wall, Padmé slid down to sit with her back at it and knocked the back of her head forcefully into it to try and clear away the memories those eyes had conjured. She gripped the rifle tightly in her quaking hands, trying to find the well of anger and resolve that had carried her through so many missions.

"He's not Anakin!" The vehement denial was half choked by hurt and despair. "He's *not* Anakin! He's Darth Vader, the fiend who killed Anakin!"

Near hyperventilation, she forced herself to be calm and draw steady breaths as she knocked her head against the wall once more. "He's Vader. *Vader*, not Anakin. He's a man who's killed countless children, has stolen any chance I had of seeing and raising my own. He doesn't deserve to live!"

The rifle slid back into the groove as her resolve returned and she rose to her knees, sighting down the scope — but the moment had passed and Vader with his cloaked colleague and the Stormtroopers were already re-boarding the shuttle. Her perfect opportunity to kill Darth Vader, the so called Lord of the Sith, had passed by and she wasn't getting a second chance.

Her breath left her in a whoosh and her head dropped to her forearm as the shuttle closed its ramp and began to spin up for take off. She closed her eyes against the pain of another failure and her inability to separate Anakin from Vader. Tears stung her eyes even as self-loathing spread through her system. Bitterness forced her to stand, taking one last look as the shuttle rose off the ground and waved her hand at it.

"One day, Vader!" Her words were passionate despite their lack of volume. "One day, I'll see you dead!"

Disappearing into the upper atmosphere, the shuttle roared out of sight and her hand dropped. Padmé inhaled deeply, trying to calm her still racing heart and failing miserably. She looked around the room and walked back to the case for her rifle. With deliberate movements, she disassembled the sniper rifle and placed it back in the case.

All that was left was to meet her own ride off planet and plan for the next time. Next time, she vowed, nothing as simple as a pair of blue eyes would deter her from her goal.

Month Twenty Three, Day 16 PEF

Chapter 13

Vader's Shuttle — Hyperspace — Month Twenty Three, Day Nine PEF

The shuttle ride back to the *Exactor* was relatively quiet and Vader took the controls himself. None of the pilots complained as it was widely known that Vader was unmatched in any aerial vehicle. Not that they would have complained otherwise. To do so would have been to die a quick, pointless death.

Asajj was the only other passenger in the cockpit, Vader having made everyone else vacate only moments after entering Hyperspace. He was staring at her now, his arms crossed over his chest, one gloved finger tapping at the opposite bicep as he examined her thoughtfully. His gaze was unnerving, as if contemplating something unmentionable — and unbearable — for the duration of their hyperspace flight.

In an attempt to divert his attention, she broached the dangerous topic of his wife. “Padmé is the Jedi Hunter.”

“So it would appear.”

“The missing Jedi was not enough proof for you?”

“Should it have been? This is a fairly active system, Ventress. Many people land to resupply.”

“Yet none have the same track record as Padmé.”

“True.” He leaned back in his chair, his hand dropping to the waistband of his trousers.

Asajj flinched and looked away.

Harsh laughter echoed in the cockpit. “Nothing so crude, Ventress.”

A piece of flimsi floated into view and she removed it gingerly from the invisible grasp. “What is this?”

“The Hunter’s trademark.” His tone was dry. “My wife’s way of saying hello.”

Asajj read the contents and arched her eyebrows. The words “We were here but now we’re gone — you never could take a hint” were slashed across the page in block lettering, indistinct and untraceable. “Her idea of a joke?”

“I have something of a collection. One for every Jedi she’s spirited away.”

“Are they all the same?”

“Never.”

“Then why?”

“A shot at my pride, I am sure.”

“The only shot she is capable of.” Contempt laced Asajj’s words. “Perhaps I should instruct her on how to wound you properly.”

He reached across, planting one hand on her thigh as the other retrieved the flimsi. His fingers dug in painfully, a silent lesson for her to mind her tongue before he leaned back and away. His fingers caught across her skirt, pulling the fabric to the side and allowing it to fall — revealing the skin underneath from her boot to the top of her thigh. The purple welts on her white skin were clearly visible as to where his fingers had been. “Watch your tongue, or I shall find *better* uses for it.”

Asajj glared at him. Her face still stung from the backhand he’d delivered earlier — but she didn’t hold her tongue. “*That* is a matter of opinion.”

“And yours is one I am not interested in.” Glittering dangerously, his eyes warned her of her punishment should she continue being insubordinate. “What else do you know of Padmé’s plans?”

“The information on the ship yard is being analyzed for infiltration points. I was sent to investigate a certain prison complex on Yaga Minor.”

“The political prisoners.” A smug smirk crossed his lips. “So she’s not changed as much as you seem to think.”

“It is for distraction purposes only. I believe she may be after the records more than the prisoners themselves.”

“I see.” Vader rubbed his thumb over the tips of his fingers absently, contemplating the information and their current predicament. “How long is your mission supposed to take?”

“You do not honestly think I will return to her after this!” Asajj was half out of her chair before she realized it.

Vader planted one hand firmly in the center of her chest and pushed her back down. “Not only will you return, but you will return with the information she requires.”

“I will never help that sorry excused of an— urk!” She gasped, her words cut off by the sudden cessation of air to her lungs.

Vader’s outstretched hand was semi-clenched, the invisible fingers of the Force having wrapped themselves around her throat and were squeezing, preventing her from finishing the sentence. “I would rethink what you are about to say, Asajj; *carefully*.”

Clawing at her throat, she nodded once and the pressure eased, but didn’t disperse completely. As if Vader waited for her to slip again. “I will not help anyone who assists Jedi!”

His hand relaxed and the pressure eased all together. “And so you are not.”

She blinked, surprised. “You said I would return to her with the information she required.”

“And so you shall.”

“How is that not helping her?”

“Padmé will never get the opportunity to use the information.”

It took a moment before Asajj realized what Vader was hinting towards. “You wish to trap her.”

“You are correct.” Vader’s eyes fairly gleamed with anticipation. “You will bring her to me.”

“She’d be better off dead!”

Snap!

Asajj didn’t even have the time to inhale before Vader slammed bodily into her, his hand about her throat, pinning and holding her to the wall. The snapped base of the chair she’d been sitting in was visible just beyond his shoulders as she clawed at his hand. His finger tips dug into the tendons of her neck, cutting off the blood flow to her brain and black spots started to encroach on her vision almost immediately. In seconds she’d be unconscious and she kicked out in an attempt to dislodge him. Vader’s body pressed closer, rendering her small rebellion futile in a matter of heartbeats. His breathing seemed to be matching the furiously labored drum of her heartbeat.

“Is that your *opinion* of your current circumstances?”

Unable to breathe or move, she simply stared at him. The grip on her throat effectively immobilized her head and the pressure against the arteries was giving her tunnel vision. Her fingers still clawed at his, but weaker now as her strength drained away with her ability to think.

“I thought not.”

Blood rushed through her system as his fingers eased off on the pressure. Lightheaded, Asajj couldn’t find the words to refute his claim. No matter what she said, it would make her a liar. Those who are unhappy with their lives don’t fight to keep them. Regardless of her circumstance, Asajj had no desire to die.

Vader’s hand slid from the threatening position down to rest on the V of her collar bone, his fingers lightly touching the sides of her neck. Asajj barely heard what he told her, the words registering in the back of her mind, but not coalescing into any semblance of order as he spoke in a concise fashion. Shaking her head to clear it, Vader paused.

“You have another objection?”

Mild though his words were, there was a dangerous undertone; a warning flag for her to tread carefully. Heeding it — she had no desire to encourage what he would likely use to punish her next — she pitched her objection diplomatically. “What you are proposing is *possible*, Master. Providing she does not attempt to kill you again.”

“I should think you would want her to succeed.”

“If I believed her capable, you would be long dead and we would not be having this conversation.”

“Or the... *pleasure* of your company?” The gleam she’d grown to loathe and fear came back to his eyes as his hand curved about her hip and began to slide upwards with near-painful pressure. “Kill her and you seal your own fate, Ventress. I have a use for you yet, and you *will* cooperate.”

There was no question of fighting when Vader’s face drew near hers, or when his hands found the fastenings to her clothing — only acceptance. Acceptance that, for the here and now, there was nothing she could do to defy him and win.

Vader’s Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Three, Day Sixteen PEF

Pain exploded through her shoulders as Asajj lifted her arms over her head, reaching for the ceiling of her quarters. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to continue the stretch.

Examining herself dispassionately in the full length mirror, she took note of the new bruises and wounds. Her near-naked body was marked, her jaw still sore from its recent healing. Vader had dislocated it violently in getting his point across, tearing several tendons, and she’d spent the better part of last three days in the bacta tank. Her shoulders were stiff from the workout he’d put her through the previous night both in the training salle — and in her bunk.

Shying away from the thought — and the way he’d taken great satisfaction in making her respond to him and his ministrations — she focused instead on the purple welts across her torso.

A round impact mark in the center of her chest marked where Vader’s heel had struck. Five welts along her hip, four at the back and one at the front, marked where his hand had grabbed her. Another five along her left deltoid and bicep and yet another along the back of her right shoulder and along her collar bone. A fading yellow and green band around her waist displayed where his legs had scissored and struck, squeezing her so tightly her back had cracked in two places.

That had been another reason for her stay in the bacta tank.

Determined to find some effective means of striking back at him, when she wasn’t on the mat — or in her bunk — catering to his whims, she spent the time vigorously training to withstand his next round of assaults; or in the bacta tank recovering from them. Vader was a harsh Master, brokering no disobedience and allowing no rebellion. No visible rebellion. The man truly was a disciple of the darkside and while Asajj loathed and hated him, she also grudgingly admired him for what he had become; a weak Jedi who had taken the power of the darkside and bathed in it so thoroughly there were few conceivable weaknesses.

Padmé, from what she could see, was the only one. And one Vader had strictly forbade her to do away with. Her lips twisted into a sneer as she lowered her arms, reveling in the ache of *honest* hard work.

Vader allowed nothing and no one around him to dictate his agenda save the Emperor, and Asajj had begun to notice that Vader often *interpreted* his orders to suit himself. Her own continued existence only showcased his independent streak and she doubted her Master answered to his own in the ways she did. Somehow, despite having met Darth Sidious, she

couldn't see Vader complying meekly with his every order though she did see him fulfilling them to his own gain. The Emperor would have to watch his back lest his apprentice decide to try and seize power.

Turning away from the mirror, Asajj began to dress. A meeting had been scheduled for this morning between her and Vader, one she dared not to arrive late to. He'd spent the better part of the last week "informing" her of his displeasure with her desire to eliminate Padmé as a threat. He'd become impossibly more violent, but controlled, making his points in the most painful and non permanent ways possible. She had no desire for a repeat of their encounter on the shuttle or the last session in his office and training salle. The man was insatiable — in more ways than one — and had no qualms about using *any* means to get his way.

Tugging on her boots, she secured the fasteners and checked her appearance once more. Other than the shadow along her jaw that was quickly fading, none of her injuries were visible. A nod to her reflection and she turned on her heel, heading for the door.

Vader was absent when she stepped into his office minutes before their appointment. She took the opportunity to study the place, dispassionately viewing the newly repaired desk and console. Her legs ached just looking at it and she turned her attention instead to the holo image on the wall. Blue skies, green plains and waterfalls in the background. A strangely beautiful piece that seemed out of place with Vader's darker tendencies. A display plaque below it read "The falls on Naboo."

That explained it.

Asajj's lips twisted as she turned away.

"Not to your taste, Ventress?"

To her credit, she didn't jump at his amused inquiry but it gave her no comfort — she hadn't heard him, or sensed him, enter. "I prefer the storm clouds of Kamino to the sunny skies of Naboo." Squaring off with him, she crossed her arms over her chest. "Do you have another lesson to teach me today?"

"Only if you persist in your stubborn objective." Vader settled himself on the edge of his desk. Asajj despised him for it — at least behind the desk there was a semi-barrier between them. "Do you?"

"It will be your funeral."

"Something, I am sure, you would not dare miss even if it were to simply dance on my grave." Vader regarded her intently. "You will be expected back with the rebels shortly, Asajj. Do you understand what you are to do?"

A shadow crossed her features as she glared at him. "Against my better judgment, yes."

"I do not keep you for your judgment. There will be no mistakes this time, Ventress. You have two weeks to accomplish your mission. If you have not succeeded by then, your usefulness to me as a field agent will need to be reevaluated."

The insinuation caused a shiver of dread to skate down her spine and, bowing low, she stepped back and away. She refused to even consider what capacities he might keep her around for, caged and chained to submit to his will. "It is not much time."

“It is more than you require. You will be expected to return with the information you were dispatched to assemble within the next couple of days.” Vader lifted one hand and a data disk rose from one of the half-open drawers of his desk. It moved quickly and smoothly to Asajj, who accepted it with one hand. “That disk holds a good deal of information about the prison facility, including a list of prisoners who were there in the last week. There are holo images taken with generic micro-binoculars and schematics of the base. Delete what you cannot use on your way back to Padmé.”

Pocketing the disk, Asajj waited, knowing there would likely be more. She wasn’t disappointed.

“Your fighter has been tampered with to appear to have taken some damage as well as having been on Yaga Minor. The radiation signature has been slightly altered to coincide with the Sun’s levels this past week. Your clothing has also been treated to appear to have been well used though the smell may make the interior of your cockpit uncomfortable for the return journey.”

“You have thought of everything, haven’t you?”

“Perhaps.” Vader straightened. “Once you return to Padmé, proceed with the plan as we have discussed.”

“Of course Master, was there anything else?”

“Do not fail me, Asajj.”

She didn’t intend to. With a nod and a half bow she turned and departed. As much as she hated Padmé and what choices she’d made, part of Asajj hated Vader more. They deserved one another.

Month Twenty Three, Day 19 PEF

Chapter 14

Padmé's Secret Base — Month Twenty Three, Day Nineteen PEF

Activity bustled across the flight desk as Asajj's fighter slipped through the magnetic field towards her regular landing point. Padmé's shuttle — the same one she'd used to land on Toydaria — sat with the cargo bay exposed and the load lifters and donks working steadily at unloading the supplies she'd brought back. Asajj missed nothing, but paid no more attention to it outwardly than she had on previous returns. She would do nothing to garner more suspicion.

Landing and popping the cockpit, she inhaled deeply from the relatively fresh recycled air of the hangar deck, finding it a refreshing change from the pungent smell of her cockpit. The deck crew waited patiently as she collected her gear and hauled herself out of the fighter. The bruised muscles in her back protested as she turned with a semblance of normal agility and she fought to keep the pain from reflecting in her features. With a nod to the crew, she slung her gear over her shoulder and headed for her quarters.

Many people were about and around in the hallways, but the overall mood was somber. Very little small talk could be heard, if any, and mostly whispers — that cut off when she neared — abounded. Ignoring the tense atmosphere was almost impossible, and Asajj didn't so much as try. It fit her mood and her disposition — she didn't like being back anymore than anyone else appeared to want to be here.

Escaping into the relative sanctuary of her quarters, she showered and changed first before pulling up the flight records. Quicker than normal, but Padmé's shuttle couldn't have been back for long with the amount of supplies still to be offloaded. These people were terrorists, but amazingly organized ones. Ah. Padmé hadn't been back long either, but there was also no record of where she had been. Not surprising.

Clean, and with her temper held firmly in check by the continued protesting of abused muscles, Asajj headed back into the hallways towards Padmé's office. The people in the halls thinned as she neared the area, the distinct feel of unease — the sensation of walking on egg shells — growing more and more prevalent as Asajj turned the corner towards Padmé's office.

Max was sitting outside it, a displeased look on his face as he stared down at a datapad. Trouble in Paradise? "Max."

"Asajj." He nodded to her before looking back down to the datapad in his lap with a frown. "Welcome back."

"Problems?"

The skin around Max's eyes and mouth tightened. He looked more haggard than usual — and despising every moment of it. "You could say that."

"Something I can help with?"

Max lifted one hand to rub the back of his neck and tilted it to ease the tension. "Unless those mystical Force powers can turn back time, change the past or influence Padmé's mood, then no."

"Padmé's mood?" Asajj echoed the words with a feeling of foreboding, a knot fisting in her gut. There was no way. No way could Padmé have... no. She wouldn't have been allowed to land if that was the case. "Did something happen while I was away?"

Leaning back in his chair, Max smiled faintly, but there was no joy in that smile. It was more a sour, cynical kind of grin that looked slightly out of place. Max was rarely cynical. "Nothing out of the ordinary if you count Padmé's mood swings as ordinary."

Asajj swallowed the bile that rose in the back of her throat and forced herself to ask a question she really didn't care to know the answer to. "Is she alright?"

"She'll live. I might not though; the planning for this operation is killing me."

"Let me see."

Max handed over the datapad. Billbringi's information was prominently displayed with the rudimentary layout of a plan of attack — the information she'd brought back the last time. Max's additions were few — it was obvious tactics were not his strong point. Asajj made a couple of notations and handed the datapad back. "This is normally Padmé's area of expertise. Why are you doing it?"

He looked at her notations, cursed softly and then rearranged the information to her suggested format — something that wouldn't get them all killed. "Our fearless leader is having some issues since our supply run started. She'll snap out of it eventually — she always does."

Max was hiding something.

Asajj wasn't sure what or why, but there was a reluctance in his words while discussing Padmé, something to do with what had happened while they were away. Something Max didn't feel it was his place to share. Despite the fact that he wasn't giving her the information she felt she needed about Padmé, Asajj admired him for his loyalty. Misplaced as it was, she could respect his code of honor.

"How long has she been like this?"

"About a week and a half."

Ten days. Alarms bells began to sound in Asajj's brain, but there was no proof to back up her suspicion. Keeping a tight rein on her temper, she continued, "I have the information she wanted about Yaga Minor. I will speak with her."

"Good luck." Max waved her towards the door. "And let me know if she's human again yet, would ya?"

A nod in Max's direction to acknowledge his request was all she spared before flicking the activation controls to Padmé's office. The door didn't respond, indicating it was locked from the inside. Another bad sign. Using the Force, she unlocked it and palmed the door. It slid open to reveal the dimly lit interior. Yet another bad sign. Asajj forced herself to control the rising suspicions. They ate away at her resolve to obey orders and *not* kill Padmé. And, despite those orders and the consequences, the thought was a very tempting tidbit right now.

"Padmé?"

"Go away Asajj."

Padmé's words were harsh, raw as if her vocal cords had been bruised or abused. Or if she'd been crying.

"I brought the information you require for the attack on Yaga Minor."

"I require?" A harsh bark of laughter echoed through the room. "What happened to we, Asajj? Or are you no longer a part of this team?"

"I am here, am I not?"

Padmé rose from the darkness by the viewport, metal flashing on her thigh, her upper body still wreathed in shadows. It denied Asajj a clear look at her face and eyes, but Asajj's attention was riveted by the empty holster on Padmé's thigh and what it might imply. "You are indeed. Don't tell me you didn't stop to visit your friend first."

"My 'friend' is a valuable source of information," Asajj told her pointedly. "We would be foolish to ignore their contribution."

Padmé turned away. "What good is information when we can't act on it? Max can't plan an operation and you're never here!"

"I have better things to do than hang around here to be snapped at!"

"Fine! Leave then, it's what you Force users are good at, isn't it?"

"Among other things." The Force Adept's eyes narrowed. "Max is not happy with his duties."

"Max can kiss my—"

"And I'm sure he has many times," Asajj broke in smoothly, taking a dark kind of pleasure in this heated exchange with Padmé. "You have always assigned projects you were unable to complete to *me*. Why change now?"

"You were on a mission and late returning, I couldn't very well wait until you got back."

"If I am two days longer because I followed your instructions carefully as to what you wished, does that not make up for it?"

Padmé was silent and for a moment and Asajj saw the cracks in her armor. The woman was spoiling for a fight — and only one thing had ever made her that mad. Failure to kill Vader. But why would Padmé not tell her if that was the case, why hide it — or try to hide it — when there were missions to be planned? The former Senator's shoulders sagged. "Another time, Asajj, okay? I'm glad you're back. Help Max where you can."

And that was that.

Dismissed, Asajj felt her hackles rise as Padmé turned away and her hands clenched in suppressed anger. The slight was almost as unforgiveable as Padmé's rescue missions for the Jedi! Her hands opened and closed as she gritted her teeth and fought to keep her temper in check. A twinge in her muscles reminded her of the price of disobedience and while the anger didn't fade, she was able to cap it and control it — to force herself to speak normally.

"I will see what I can do."

Padmé didn't appear to hear her as Asajj turned on her heel and left.

Max didn't look up from the datapad as Asajj crossed in front of him. "Still out of it, huh?"

"*That* is an understatement. She was barely civil."

A dark chuckle escaped from Max as he looked up at her. "Welcome to the club. This happens every freaking time."

"Every time?"

Asajj mentally *urged* Max to confide in her... but the formidable slicer simply smiled slightly and shook his head.

"Padmé's story to tell when she's ready. She hasn't even told me what happened yet."

But, despite that, they both had a pretty good idea of what had occurred. Asajj extended her hand for the datapad. "I will trade you."

"For what?"

"There is encoded material on the disk I returned with. A download of the prisoner's list I believe. I will plan the attack on Billbringi if you extract the data."

Before she'd finished speaking, Max was already ejecting the datarod and sliding it into her hand. "With a deal like that I'm not likely to refuse."

"I thought not." She pulled the datarod with the information on Yaga Minor from her tunic and surrendered it. "There may be more encoded data. I was able to upload a section of it before having to cut the connection for fear of discovery. Some of it may be more useful than others."

"In other words, it might be their shopping list."

"It is possible."

"No worries. I'll have this cracked in no time."

Asajj left Max sitting as a guard outside Padmé's office and headed to collect her datapad so she could begin work on planning a raid that would never happen.

Padmé's Secret Base — Month Twenty Three, Day Twenty PEF

Asajj slept better in her berth on Padmé's base than she had since leaving it. Planning the raid on Billbringi had kept her up for most of the night and when she'd finally crawled into bed exhausted, she hadn't struggled to find sleep as she had on Vader's flag ship. Likely because she was not plagued by the memories her bunk carried, nor the possibility of creating more. Despite the sense of security her quarters offered, the anger within her continued to simmer and boil, begging for a kind of release she could not allow. Not if she wished to continue her own vendetta against the Jedi.

Billbringi's plan of attack was easy enough to outline, however, she would need specific information from Padmé before solidifying the plans. Perhaps after another night of reflection, Padmé would be ready to either confirm — or deny — the suspicions Asajj carried as to why she was acting this way. It was trademark Padmé behavior — after she'd tried and failed to kill Vader. Only where that would have occurred was what bothered Asajj.

Still, she had no proof and it was making her uneasy. Somehow she had to get Padmé to cooperate.

Entering the corridors which lead to Padmé's office, Asajj was mildly surprised to see that the chair Max had occupied the previous day was empty. She dismissed it off hand, certain he had to sleep sometime, and headed for Padmé's office — only to pause when two raised voices caught her attention.

Muffled by the door, Asajj stepped closer to understand what they were saying.

"—don't care *how* many times you've checked and rechecked that rifle! I'm telling you the thing jammed or something when I was ready to take my shot!"

"The rifle or you?" Max's voice carried a spiteful, hard edge Asajj hadn't heard before and secretly delighted in. It served Padmé right. "That rifle is up to spec with all of the features functioning at maximum efficiencies. I cleaned the blasted thing myself. I broke it down and ran every single test, even duplicated the conditions *you* said you were under. *There. Is. Nothing. Wrong. With. It!*"

"And I'm telling you there is! Check it again!"

"Check yourself first! If you were able to kill Vader, you'd have done it by now. Toydaria's just another in a long line of excuses and I've had it with them! That rifle is working perfectly, it's your head that's not wired for being a killer."

"I've killed my share of people, Max and I can kill him too!"

"When, Padmé? When the Coruscant sun explodes? Or maybe when the Empire is but a long distant dream?"

"How dare you, I—"

"I dare because you're jeopardizing everyone and everything in this base with your inability to commit to that goal. I dare because you always end up like this afterwards and won't tell me why. And I dare because I'm your friend. A friend who's had enough of your lies and excuses. You can't kill Vader and it's time you faced it."

"Next time, when the rifle is working properly, we won't be having this conversation!"

“HA!” Max’s footsteps were loud on the floor and Asajj leaned against the wall opposite it, contemplating what she was hearing. “If you were thinking clearly, you’d know I’m lousy at this raid planning junk. I’m not your backup plan, Padmé Naberrie and I’m sick of being treated like one. Do your own dirty work — and start with admitting that you can’t kill Vader!”

Max stormed out of Padmé’s office, not seeming to notice Asajj where she stood, her casual pose giving away none of the trepidation and anger, the betrayal she was feeling. Max disappeared around the corner before Padmé’s door closed. Asajj’s eyes narrowed, anger and fear bubbling to the surface as she stared into the open maw.

Padmé had tried to kill Vader on Toydaria. Padmé had *seen* Vader on Toydaria. There was every chance Padmé had seen Asajj walking as his silent shadow despite the precautions she’d taken. That Padmé had discovered her dual loyalties, caught between quarreling husband and wife — for Asajj knew they were still bound by vows even if neither followed them. As Asajj knew better than anyone. Vader’s touch still sullied her body, a reminder of just how very much alive he was — and how very badly Padmé had failed. If Padmé had pulled the trigger, none of the pain and suffering she’d been exposed to in the last week and a half would need to have happened.

Staring through the doorway, she extended one hand as it began to close. The door stuttered and stalled, stopping almost completely open.

“Stupid kriffing door!”

“Stupid kriffing Naberrie!”

“Asajj?”

“How dare you, Padmé?”

“How dare I what? I don’t answer to you, Ventress.”

“We were supposed to be equal partners. You are supposed to keep me informed when you are going after Vader. And now I find out that not only did you go after Vader without me, you failed *yet again* and are trying to blame it on your rifle!”

“It wasn’t like that—”

“No?” Asajj’s tone was scathing. “How was it? A gust of wind blew across your vision and blurred it? The trigger had a safety you were unfamiliar with? Or maybe a small native creature jumped into your field of vision? What excuse as you going to try and sell now, you coward?”

“I am not a coward!”

“You prove it every time you get behind that rifle with Vader in your sights!” Asajj took a half step towards Padmé, her hands clenched. “*Every time!* With this last attempt it makes ten. Ten times where you could not bring yourself to pull the trigger. If I had known I was teaming up with a squeamish, twofaced, coward like you, I would have killed you on Carida and been done with it!”

“Now wait just one second, Asajj—”

“You wait! I have had enough of your excuses, Padmé. It is time someone else did what you cannot do, or gives you the motivation you require to complete the task!”

“I can do this on my own, I don’t need a babysitter.”

Asajj advanced another step. “The hell you do not! If you had informed me of your intention I would have traveled with you and *ensured* Vader’s demise. But that would not be good enough for you, would it? No, he must die by your hand — only you cannot pull the trigger!”

“I *will* pull the trigger—”

“When, Padmé? Tell me when and mean it.”

“The next time!”

“When, in a month? Another month of being lied to? Of having you convince us that you will not let anything stop you this time? Another month of deceit simply so you do not have to admit that you cannot do it? I have had enough.”

“Alright damn, you, I will! I’ll set the operation up for next month!”

“So I can watch you falter at the last second because you are still so blindly in love with the man you couldn’t kill him if he was presented to you bound and gagged on a sacrificial tablet?”

“I am *not* in love with him! I hate him, do you hear me, I *hate* him!”

Bitter laughter erupted from Asajj and she shook her head. “If you did he would be dead by now. There would not have been any second or third, let alone *ten* tries to get the job done. It would have happened the very first time you aimed that rifle at him. But, instead you let him go. You let him walk away. And all because you still love him and can’t stand the thought of killing your husband.”

“That monster is *not* my husband! Anakin would never do the things Vader has done.”

“Are you so sure about that?”

Weighted silence descended between them for a moment and Padmé’s horrified whisper almost echoed into it. “What are you talking about?”

“You seem to forget, Padmé, that I was once under orders from Darth Sidious, your *very dear friend* Palpatine, to kill Anakin Skywalker. I initially thought it was because he was a nuisance. It was not until later I realized that was not the real reason. Did your husband never tell you how he obtained his lovely facial scar?”

Padmé flinched at the malicious tone, but couldn’t answer as Asajj continued.

“Sidious knew from the first that Anakin was capable of great things. He knew it, he manipulated it, he deliberately fostered the relationship they had all because he wanted to discover if your *dear* husband was capable to wearing the mantle of a Sith Lord. Not only was he capable, he proved it — on more than one occasion.”

Ignoring the flash of hurt that crossed Padmé’s features, Asajj was too incensed to care, her words continuing and deliberately aimed to wound.

"I was witness to it. He used the darkside of the Force to defeat me on Yavin IV and again on Coruscant after I slashed his face. I did not escape from that encounter unscathed, would you like to see the scars I obtained at his hand? The scars the darkside of the Force your *beloved Anakin* used on me have left? Did you know he left me for dead, believing his slide to the dark side were things he could control? He was a fool!"

"He wouldn't—"

"You are a bigger fool, Padmé *Skywalker* for believing that your Anakin is a pure, good being! Anakin Skywalker was capable, and is capable of being Darth Vader. They are not two separate entities inhabiting the same body. They are the deliberate choices of the man you married and resulted in his acceptance of the mantle of Darth Vader. *They are the same man!* Until you accept this, you will never be able to kill him. You will never be able to pull the trigger and I am sick of hearing you tell me otherwise. You are still so blindly in love with a man who has *chosen* to walk a dark path it is pathetic." Infuriated, the Force adept spun on her heel to walk away.

Padmé stumbled backwards, hitting the side of her desk, her hands curling about the edge as Asajj's words struck daggers into her heart. It was happening again. Memories from Tatooine — the last time she'd been with Anakin to find his mother — flooded through her mind. Memories of his admissions, his pain. His remorse over what he'd done but not why. It wasn't possible it had reoccurred; Anakin had known it was wrong! Had known it and fought against it. He'd strived to be something better than what he'd seen he could be.

Asajj had to be wrong; Vader and her Anakin weren't... couldn't be... they were two completely different people! Vader was incapable of showing the kind of remorse, the kind of *emotion* Anakin had shown after he'd gone to find his mother. Asajj moved away from the doorway and Padmé found her voice.

"Asajj, don't do this."

"Do what?" Asajj glared at Padmé over her shoulder, uncaring that her anger was showing. It felt good to give it free reign, though she couldn't yet unleash it completely. "All I am going to do is find information and help. My 'friend' thought very highly of you before this, Padmé Naberrie, I hate to think of what they will think of you now."

"I don't even know this friend of yours!"

"And at the rate you are going, you never will. Keep pushing Max and you will lose him too!"

"Asajj!"

"You cannot kill Vader so I will have my 'friend' devise a plan to rid the galaxy of him once and for all!" The Force Adept swept away, her anger simmering around her like a cloud. Padmé attempted to speak reason, to get her to stop, but Asajj would have none of it. Ignoring her so called friend's protests and assurances, she let the door to Padmé's office close in her face and headed for her quarters.

"What do you mean she's gone again!"

"I am afraid, Mistress Padmé, that the fighter that Miss Ventress used is no longer in the hangar bay."

"Did she leave me a message, Threepio?" Padmé ploughed both hands into her hair.

"I have not been able to locate one."

Her fingers curled in towards her scalp. "Thank you, Threepio."

"There is more."

Padmé rubbed her hands over her face.

Of course there was.

"It would appear that shortly before her departure Miss Ventress accessed the data from the main storage bank. She appeared particularly interested in knowing what you have been doing in her time away."

Her initial reaction was one of relief. There was nothing unusual in that particular portion of Asajj's routine. She regularly read back after an absence to see what she'd missed — she hated being out of the loop. "Were those the only logs, Threepio?"

"The navcomputer history was also accessed. It would appear she is interested in knowing where we have been."

A sneaking suspicion formed in the back of Padmé's mind; an ugly suspicion that Asajj's loyalties may have been compromised, or that her own activities may have been discovered. But no, Asajj would never have returned if she believed that Padmé was the individual who was saving Jedi. Asajj had made her stance clear — it was one reason they erased the navcomputer logs after every rescue. Still, those logs would allow Asajj to track their whereabouts since the last rescue mission on Toydaria. The place she'd failed to kill Vader.

"That's all, Threepio."

"Oh dear." Threepio shuffled out of her office, the door closing behind him.

Padmé settled heavily into her chair behind her desk and stared at the display across the room without seeing it. Asajj's "friend" was likely the cause of her sudden disappearance and if Asajj wanted to continue to work with Padmé, Padmé was going to have to insist on more information or cut Asajj loose. There was too much at stake to continue keeping the loose cannon around and it was a risk that Padmé was unwilling to take.

Month Twenty Three, Day 23 PEF

Chapter 15

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Three, Day Twenty Three PEF

Asajj swept onto the bridge of Vader's flag ship with her cloak billowing behind her, her eyes sweeping the deck as she searched for his tall figure. The efficiently run deck barely seemed to note her entrance, but Asajj felt the tell tale ripple through the Officers and personnel manning the stations. Her first sweep failed to detect the Sith Lord, however, she knew by Force urgings that he was there.

"Lord Vader."

Several technicians looked up from their consoles for a brief moment before going back to work.

"You return empty handed, Ventress."

Turning, she found Vader standing in one of the pits behind a sensor technician, his hand resting casually on the back of the man's chair. Despite the gap between them, having Vader below her did nothing to diminish his presence or the flash of a threat in his gaze. She nodded towards the exit. "I must speak with you."

"So I gathered." Vader leapt easily from the pit to the deck and turned back. "Ensign Mahlorgh, I expect that sensor data correlated by twenty one hundred hours."

"Yes, Lord Vader."

Asajj waited as Vader outlined what he expected from his technician before finally turning back towards her. "Come with me."

Dropping into step behind him, she half expected to be lead to his office — it was where most of their discussions took place — however, Vader surprised her by leading her to the General's office just off the bridge. He motioned her inside before stepping in behind her and locking the door.

"This had best be important, Ventress."

"I would not have returned if I did not believe it to be so."

"Be quick, I have important matters to attend to."

Lips flattening in a thin line, Asajj glared at him from the trapped position between the desk and the door — where Vader casually leaned against the locked panel. "Padmé was on Toydaria."

"We know this."

“You misunderstand me!” Asajj snapped. “She was on Toydaria and had a line to kill you — and failed to take the shot. *Again!*”

Vader’s eyebrows rose and he straightened. “Indeed?”

“She could not pull the trigger on her rifle. A rifle, I might add, that was designed and built with the specific intention of killing you.”

“Is it any good?”

“When the trigger is pulled.”

“And you would like to pull that trigger, wouldn’t you, Ventress?”

“I would rather use my bare hands to finish what I started,” she eyed the scar that ran vertical over his right eye. “The sense of satisfaction would only be that much greater.”

Vader smirked. “I shall enjoy watching you try, and fail. What other news do you bring? How goes your mission?”

“Badly.” The admission was grudgingly offered. “I have lost my desire to be on Padmé’s base of operations. Holding a civil conversation has become something of an impossibility. We have fought, when she will speak with me, and cannot communicate effectively. I no longer trust her and, in turn, I believe she is beginning to doubt me. I do not believe it is wise for me to return to her.”

“If you do not, it will only confirm her suspicions about you. Conjecture is all she has right now. *Do not* give her the evidence she needs to tie you to me.”

“She *claims* to hate you as much as I do; you are the last person she would believe me capable of working for.”

“You sound as if you do not believe her claim.”

“I do not. If she hated you, you would be already dead.”

“So you claim. Hate is a funny emotion and not one all beings feel in the same fashion.”

Asajj narrowed her eyes at him. “Or some feel not at all.”

“Padmé has never been a hateful or spiteful person. When you return to her with information regarding my whereabouts, as well as a solid plan for completing her so called mission, you will not only be forgiven, but any conceived transgressions she may have imagined will be forgotten. It is the way of things and a trade she understands all too well.”

“It is a trade she will be unlikely to accept,” Asajj spat the words venomously. “And one I am disinclined to offer despite the incentives. It would be better to eliminate her completely, to remove the threat to both you and the Empire.”

“And yourself, no doubt.” His eyes gleamed dangerously.

“No other option removes her as completely as her demise. It would rid the galaxy of the possible threat should she ever escape to resume her activities. Her operation cannot function without her and it would disband should she disappear.”

“And disappear she shall, simply not in the way you appear to intend.”

“It is the most—”

“I grow tired of repeating myself.” His hand came up threateningly. “You *will not* kill her. You will return to her, you will *discuss* the matter of my... demise. Civilly. As you once did. You will raise no more suspicions, and confirm nothing she asks beyond supplying the information she requires to complete her task.”

“She has no proof.”

“Keep it that way — in *all* aspects.”

Her lips thinned into a firm line. “Padmé has seen my bruises and may inquire about them again.”

“How careless of you.” He advanced towards her. “Perhaps you need a reminder as to the price of your failure?”

Backing away, she hit the desk after a single step. “I am well aware of the *price* and it is not one I intend to incur again.”

“But one you would pay regardless.” His fingers grasped her chin tightly. “One you will continue to pay until you succeed.”

Swallowing, she dared to glare back at him. “Things will proceed as you wish; providing I return to her unmarked.”

“Conditions, my apprentice?”

“Should you wish I give her no evidence, Master? Those were your orders.”

His expression tightened and so did his fingers for a fraction of a second before he let her go. “I will do more than break your jaw should you fail Ventress. You have seven days.”

Vader swept from the room, leaving her to contemplate the dark foreboding in his tone. Seven days to succeed or fail. Seven days to incur his wrath. Seven days to survive — or die.

The choice was not a difficult one.

Vader’s Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Three, Day Twenty Five PEF

Two days after Vader’s threat, Asajj was putting the finishing touches on the information she’d need to hand to Padmé when word reached her that *someone* had ordered her fighter retired and a shuttle put to her disposal. As only one person would dare order her about, she abandoned her planning and went looking for him. It wasn’t something she would do under normal circumstances, but the man seemed determined to sabotage any chance she had of making this work.

Never mind the fact that if she succeeded he would obtain his heart’s desire; he seemed to be deliberately making things more difficult for her. Or, possibly, more difficult for whoever would obtain the information she was going to bring. Striding quickly through the hallways, she sprinted down the last corridor to the hangar deck to find Vader watching as the deck crew was getting ready to seal her fighter and put it into mothballs.

“Are you deliberately attempting to sabotage any chance I have in making this plan succeed?”

Vader didn’t even twitch at her angry words. “You will require something that seats more than one, Ventress.”

“And I will obtain it there — along with the capability of storing my fighter!” Marching straight up to his side, she stepped into his line of vision, drawing his unconcerned gaze. “If you change my ship with one so obviously Imperial in nature —” a wave of her hand took in the shuttle that was being outfitted on the far side of the hangar, “-their gunners will open fire on me seconds before they jump to a new system!”

Vader held up one hand, and the techs around Asajj’s fighter stopped, stepping back. Vader’s expression was carefully neutral, but there was a shrewd gleam in his eyes. Asajj understood immediately. This was a test.

A test of her knowledge and tactics; a test of her courage.

“Do you presume to know better than I?”

“When you are being deliberately obtuse, Skywalker, I do!”

His eyes narrowed. “You’re walking a dangerous line, Asajj.”

“And it is my life you are deliberately throwing away. I believe you wish the success of this mission, correct?”

He arched an eyebrow as if to ask what her point was.

“Then allow me to make my own arrangements. I *know* what can get past their defenses; I helped set them up. That shuttle would be obliterated in seconds.”

“Then by all means...” Waving towards the technicians, he took a deliberate step back and cross his arms over his chest, waiting.

Glaring at him, she turned back to the technicians. Conscious of his assessing look, she began issuing orders.

Vader watched as Asajj succinctly informed the technicians of what she wished to have done to her fighter, his eyes tracing the proud jut of her chin and the poise with which she carried herself. Despite his *personal* attention, she still carried and deported herself as a warrior. He’d cowed her into submission through brute force, but hadn’t broken her spirit.

He respected that.

Asajj stepped forward and bent to speak with one of the technicians, giving Vader an excellent view of her profile. A view he’d entertained on more than one occasion, and as if did most times, it stirred his blood. Breaking Asajj to his will was a diversion he found both stimulating and pleasurable. She likely didn’t share his opinion, but that was of little consequence to him; she enjoyed it enough at the time.

He made sure of it.

The swing of her lightsabers caught his attention and he focused on them for a moment. Their worn, well worked casings were covered in thread bare grips that needed rewinding.

Hell, they needed replacing. Asajj maintained her weapons well — they fairly gleamed despite the tarnish — but the blades were old style. Likely taken off the opponents she'd fought after their last encounter on Coruscant.

The blades didn't become her anymore than her alliance with his wife. Asajj was a potent force, one that was becoming hardened and tempered under his tutelage. He'd seen signs of improvement — not only in her fighting style, but in her deportment. Her restraint had improved as had her control. They would need more polishing — and he intended to use the time she remained aboard to stress just how important those aspects of her training were — but they were beyond what she'd come to him with.

Satisfaction at his own handiwork was almost visible in the smug tilt of his lips, or would have been if Asajj had looked his way. She was developing into a very useful Force user — dare he might say Sith? She had the potential and he had technically taken her on as his apprentice. When an apprentice pleases their Master, there were normally rewards. Thus far, he'd rewarded her by unblemished night's sleep. Perhaps it was time to do something more tangible, something more *real* — providing she succeeded on this next mission.

Yes.

That was it. He would prepare her reward for the event of her success, but would also prepare her punishment. Better to have everything ready and all of the possibilities covered.

Satisfied that Asajj had the situation in hand, and had not only been willing to challenge him but had — a test she'd passed easily it would seem — he turned and left the hangar bay. He had preparations to make based on the success — or failure — of her mission and little time left to complete them.

Month Twenty Three, Day 29 PEF

Chapter 16

Padmé's Secret Base — Padmé's Office — Month Twenty Three, Day Twenty Nine PEF

A week went by before Asajj returned and it gave Padmé time to think about the Force Adept's explosion and the ugly accusations. In particular the idea that she was still in love with her husband. Max had forgiven her quickly enough after an abject apology, and she'd spent a good deal of that week mentally fighting the accusation or trying to deny it in Max's embrace.

Thus far, she'd come to only one conclusion. Asajj was right. Padmé *was* still in love with her husband — with Anakin. But Anakin had died the moment Vader had emerged, twisted and evil. Anakin might have fallen, true he'd tripped a time or two, but he'd always seemed to emerge stronger than before. More confident; more skilled. He'd persevered through hardships few had faced and come back to her with fewer scars than she'd ever expected. She'd dreaded hearing from some source about his death and had been ecstatic — and terrified — when she'd discovered the miracle of their child. The events that had followed her revelation of the secret to Anakin, and his joyful reception, were painful to recall.

Padmé stared out the viewport in her office, fighting to resist the memories that were closer at hand thanks to Asajj's disgusted accusation. Memories that were tied into her children and held the power to rattle her resolve and deny her the revenge she so desperately sought.

The absolution.

"Brooding doesn't solve anything."

A faint smile crossed her lips. "And it doesn't mend fences either, right Max?"

"You said it, not me." He moved to stand beside her, his hands sliding over her shoulders and beginning to kneed the taught muscles. "But some fences aren't worth mending."

"We need her."

"You need her, you mean."

Padmé shrugged. "Is there a difference? I know she's been acting strange lately, but no more than normal when I really think about it."

"Are you trying to rationalize not changing the transponder codes or are you just trying to convince yourself?"

"I don't know." She sighed. "I can't do this without her and I know it. She's my best chance..."

“You’ll find them, Padmé.”

“It doesn’t do me any good if Vader’s still alive, does it? Maybe you and Asajj are right.”

His hands stilled for a moment before continuing. “About which part?”

“Maybe I *can’t* kill Vader.”

“Maybe you’re just not a killer, is that it?”

“Not on the same level as the Stormtroopers or the Empire’s sniper units. Or like the mercenaries we hire.”

“Like, Asajj you mean.”

“That too.” Padmé sighed, rotating her shoulders under his fingers. “Hmmm, that feels good.”

“Asajj’s past forged her into the kind of person she is, full of bitterness and hatred.”

“Isn’t that what I am?”

“To a degree. But you also regret your actions when they affect other people. Asajj doesn’t.” He squeezed her shoulders before going back to the consistent kneading. “It’s what makes you such an effective leader. You’re driven, but you don’t allow that drive to overrule your awareness of the people who work with you as individuals. We’re not pawns to be thrown away when things go wrong.”

“Like in some of Asajj’s plans you mean.”

“In their first drafts maybe,” the grin in his voice was noticeable. “Once you’ve looked at them you ensure that’s not the case.”

“But what if I can’t kill Vader, Max?” She turned to look at him. “What if... what if after all of this I simply can’t look that monster in the eye and be rid of him for good?”

“Then you’ll find another way. You’re just not cut out to be an assassin, Padmé — you’re too human.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Max slid his hands up to cup her face, his thumbs tracing the lines of her cheek bones. “It means that you care too much no matter—”

“Mistress Padmé! Mistress Padmé!”

Padmé stared at Max for another moment but he didn’t finish his sentence before she reluctantly turned to look at Threepio. Max’s hands slid from her face and he stepped away to give her space. “What is it Threepio?”

The golden protocol droid was shuffling forward as quickly as his mechanical limbs would allow, waving his arms in excitement. “Her fighter has returned!”

“Who’s fight— Asajj?”

“Yes, Asajj,” The Force Adept swept into the office with the economical movements that characterized her as much as her heritage. “You seem surprised to see me?”

Padmé glanced Max's way for a moment and then back to Asajj. "I wasn't sure you'd come back after the way you left the last time. I was out of line, Asajj — I'm sorry."

The Force Adept went still and then inclined her head. "I bring news you may wish to hear in light of our last... conversation."

"Oh?"

"My friend has turned up evidence of Vader's next move. Concrete plans that cannot be changed and give you the perfect opportunity to plan an ambush." Her eyes gleamed with anticipation. "Not just an ambush, but one with contingencies and with far more than your three day safety window."

"Three days is all we're ever sure of," Padmé told her noncommittally. "How did this friend of yours obtain their intelligence?"

"There are ways." Asajj stepped up to Padmé's desk, noting idly how her former friend now seemed to be perpetually wearing a blaster on her hip or thigh. She wondered if Padmé wore the thing during her trysts with Max. "You *claimed* you wished to be rid of him; that you would find a way to do so. I bring you the means to prove it!"

"I'm listening."

"At the end of next month there will be several celebrations for Empire Day."

Padmé's hands clenched and she squeezed her eyes shut unconsciously. Empire Day. Marking a second year of tyranny, a second year of pain; a second year her babies were growing up without her. Max's hand slid back onto Padmé's shoulder and squeezed as Asajj continued, having stopped the moment Padmé didn't appear to be paying attention. Padmé lifted her gaze to Asajj's and smiled faintly.

"May I continue?"

The former Senator nodded.

"Good. Now, there is a rumor that the Emperor has been planning a large celebration. My friend not only confirmed this, but the supposedly secret location. Preparations are already underway on the planet to welcome the Lord Vader. He will be expected to not only speak for the people, at the Emperor's instruction, but to give a small speech. This leaves us with two options."

"A speech?"

Asajj nodded, a decidedly distasteful gesture. "I did not believe it either, however the system will have its governor appointed on Empire day and it is Lord Vader's duty to introduce the man."

"I see." Padmé leaned into Max for support. "So what opportunities does this grant us? Vader will be heavily defended."

"Hardly. The man is a Sith Lord and confident in his prowess. Overconfident, perhaps. He has no guards, no entourage and no assistance. The platform from which he will be required to speak will give us an opportunity to plant an explosive device. The plaza in which he'll

give the speech gives us a clear line of fire from several directions. The whole operation speaks of his arrogance — he believes he is untouchable.”

With good reason, Padmé recalled. Vader was a truly frightening opponent to behold when engaged in combat. She’d heard enough stories to believe it. “What was your plan, Asajj?”

“I’d like to take a look at that information before we do anything with it, if I may.” Max cut in with another squeeze to Padmé’s shoulder. “To confirm it’s authentic.”

Asajj slid a data disc from her sleeve and plugged it into the desk. Someone had already sliced the disk and the confirmation codes and symbols — confirming it came from Lord Vader’s personal database — popped up in holo format. The Force Adept watched them both closely, noting how they seemed to relax once proof was given — and her words hissed out before she thought. “Do you not trust me?”

“It’s your friend we question, Asajj.” Padmé attempted to placate the Force Adept, “we don’t know them.”

“My word is no longer good enough.” Asajj drew herself up proudly, her eyes narrowing. “Is that it?”

“That’s not it at all.” Padmé stepped towards the other woman. “It’s just that there are lives at stake when we plan something of this scope—”

“Liar!” Asajj slapped her hand on the console and shut down the image. The disc popped out and she tucked it away. “I knew it. I *knew* it. We have planned operations larger than this and simply because I have made some new contacts you no longer trust me. I have done everything in my power to aid you. I have played the fool, baited Vader to give you the chances you claimed you required and now, after all of that, you *do not* trust me!”

“No, I—”

“Spare me, Padmé. I see the proof before my eyes. Even when presented with other options, you will never be able to accomplish the task you set yourself! You *cannot* kill Vader and you will not allow yourself to consider information that would let you accomplish that goal! They did not have to help me, but they chose to because they believe in what we are doing. They believe ridding the galaxy of Vader is necessary. I would be better off taking their information and—”

“I don’t know your friend!” Padmé fairly shouted the words, slapping her hands palm down on the table to make her point. “I’ve made enough enemies; can you blame me if I’m a little leery?”

“Then come with me to meet them.” Asajj’s anger seemed to drain away and she seized on the opportunity. “With their network of information and Max we can come up with a plan to eliminate Vader once and for all.”

“I—” Padmé stared at Asajj, aware that this was a turning point. If she turned the Force Adept down, Asajj would accuse her of cowardice and walk away. For good. All because Padmé couldn’t trust her. If she chose to go she might very well be walking into a trap. But she *needed* Asajj and they’d been friends since the beginning, partners in their scheme to rid the galaxy of Vader and cause trouble for the Empire. If her friend’s friend could help accomplish that goal, it was worth the risk.

“Set up the rendezvous, Asajj.”

“Padmé—”

“No Max.” She shook her head, cutting off his protest. “I’ve made up my mind. If Asajj has friends that are able to obtain this kind of information, imagine what you could do with their equipment. We need their help if we’re going to do this.”

“I don’t like it.”

“What do you find questionable?” Asajj inquired pointedly. “That she will be with me?”

“That she’ll be with *only* you.”

“And my friend.”

“Whom we’ve never met. How do we know this isn’t a trap?”

“Padmé will simply have to trust me.”

And that was as simple as it got. Max looked about to protest again and Padmé reached up to cover his hands with hers, turning to face him. “I’ll be alright, Max. Whoever this friend is, Asajj wouldn’t take me if she felt it would be dangerous. She likes causing trouble for Vader as much as you do.”

Max didn’t look convinced but he nodded reluctantly.

The Force Adept smiled. “I will make the arrangements. You will want to arrange to have my fighter carried in the belly of that behemoth you call a shuttle, Padmé. An older model, if you have one.”

“What’s wrong with the other one?”

“It is far easier to modify for hidden weapons than your regular transport. They will be more willing to converse should you arrive visibly unarmed. There is one on the hangar deck being serviced that will work perfectly. If you can arrange it, we can be gone within the hour and meet them tomorrow morning.” She inclined her head and strode away, presumably to inform her new friends of their imminent arrival.

Padmé and Max watched as Asajj disappeared and Max voiced what he hadn’t dared in Asajj’s presence. “She’s not the same as she was when she left.”

“I know.”

“You’re probably walking into a trap.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you doing this?”

“Because there’s a chance I’m not. Asajj was right. I don’t have any proof that she’s turned against me. She hasn’t done anything except disappear and that’s not exactly unusual. She’s always come back with excellent intelligence and *reliable* intelligence. We confirmed her information about the shipyard at Billbringi yesterday. While I’m gone, it’ll give you a chance to go through it more thoroughly to get the preliminary attack data I’ll need.”

"I still don't like it." He held up one hand to forestall her continued defense and smiled faintly. "But I'll get right on that analysis and it'll be ready by the time you get back. Just... watch your back. I don't trust this."

Padmé watched Max leave, a funny feeling settling over her as she did. Pushing it away, she reminded herself of her arguments to Max. Asajj hadn't proven to be anything but trustworthy — if a little unreliable; there was nothing to worry about.

Padmé's Secret Base — Flight Deck — Month Twenty Three, Day Twenty Nine PEF

An hour later, Padmé was checking the power level on her blaster as Asajj's fighter was being connected to the interior of the shuttle they'd be taking. Threepio stood beside her, a steady stream of displeasure wafting over her.

"I do not see why I cannot accompany you mistress. I would prove to be most invaluable and you may even need my talents to communicate with this friend of —"

"Threepio." Padmé holstered the blaster and turned to face him, a tolerant smile on her face. "You *are* invaluable; that's why I can't bring you with me."

"You may require my help, I could—"

"No."

"I will act professionally, Mistress, you need not worry—"

"I'm not." She grasped the droid by his golden shoulders. "I can't chance that I might lose you too, Threepio. Asajj's partner might take one look at you and decide you're the price of whatever information they've provided. I can't take that risk."

"If my sale will—"

Padmé was already shaking her head. "No, Threepio. You're too important to me. Stay here and help Max with the data Asajj brought back. I'll be fine."

"But I—"

"Threepio." An exasperated smile crossed her lips. "I'll be back before you know it."

"Mistress, I feel obligated to remind you of my last instructions from—"

Her smile died. "Do and I'll deactivate you."

"But it would be against my programming to remain—"

"I'll make it an order, Threepio. This is something I have to do on my own. If Asajj's friend proves to be as trustworthy as she's been, and keeps providing us with the same reliable Intel, I'll think about bringing you with me on the next meeting. I can't be worrying about you or allow them to use you against me. You're doing far more for me by being here and helping Max than you would be accompanying Asajj and I."

Threepio's posture seemed to sag. "If you feel I would be in the way—"

"It's not that, never that." Padmé gave into an impulse and hugged the droid. "I would never forgive myself if anything happened to you, Threepio. Next time, you can come with us, okay?"

"If you insist. Be careful, Mistress."

"Padmé."

"Are you ready, Asajj?"

"I am waiting on you."

Padmé stepped back and offered Threepio a smile. "Don't worry. Max will take good care of you."

"Oh dear."

Laughing, Padmé turned and strode up the ramp into the shuttle, shaking her head. The ramp slid shut as she made her way to the cockpit, following Asajj. The Force Adept took the pilot's seat and deftly began the pre-flight sequence. Padmé buckled herself into the crash webbing of the co-pilot's chair and flicked on the comm. "Tower this is—" she checked the shuttle's ID code— "Shuttle Sierra One One Niner Eight Tango requesting clearance for departure."

"Roger that Shuttle Slone, you're cleared for departure."

"Roger that Tower. This is base Alpha. Estimated return time of forty four hours. Clear skies."

"Tower copies, base Alpha. Happy hunting."

A flick of Padmé's finger turned off the channel. "We're clear."

"I heard." Asajj's hands were flying over the console and Padmé noted that the coordinates for their hyperspace jump had already been inputted into the navcomputer. "Are you sure about this, Padmé?"

"A funny time to be having second thoughts, isn't it?"

Asajj's lips twisted in a semblance of a smile — though it was more of a grimace. "You may not like my new contact."

"If they keep providing us with the kind of information they have been, what's not to like?"

"They are a fairly high placed Imperial official — one that does not agree with all of the Emperor's edicts. If you wish to abort, the time is now."

"Their information has been reliable thus far, Asajj. If they wish to meet with me, I will do them the courtesy of a hearing."

The shuttle lifted off the landing pad and shot through the magnetic field into space. They arrowed away from the ships that made up Padmé's hidden base, straight towards a hyper space departure point. Padmé sat back in her chair as Asajj quickly re-checked their

destination's coordinates and made a minor adjustment. Then the stars dissolved into starlines and they were on their way.

One in hyperspace, Padmé unbuckled her crash webbing and stretched out.

Asajj was busy checking something on the nav computer and didn't so much as glance her way.

"What're you reading?"

"Instructions."

"Anything important?"

"It is a contingent for bringing you or one of your organization with me. I will not be in my fighter as I have been previously."

"You were expecting me to come?"

"No." Asajj turned back, turning off the screen along with the message. "But I would be remiss if I did not say that it was something my friend has requested before. They admire your tenacity in the face of adversity. You have more than one admirer among them."

"Just how high up is this friend?"

"High enough to obtain the information you were given without incurring suspicion."

"A general then?"

The Force Adept inclined her head.

"A dangerous ally, Asajj."

"True. But then, which of us are not?" Pushing out of her chair — Asajj hadn't bothered to secure her restraints — she moved towards the back. "Take first watch, Padmé. It will take several hours to make our rendezvous point and I would like to meditate before then."

Padmé watched her go. Silence descended in the cabin, a flashing light from the console Asajj had been using the only strangely out of place occurrence. With a decisive movement, she slid into the pilot's chair and flicked the console back on. An apprehensive glance towards the door showed it remained closed and no noise could be heard from the other side.

Looking back to the console, Padmé scanned the instructions:

In the event you are able to obtain her cooperation — or one of her group's — do what you can to bring them with you on your next trip. Take them to the following coordinates:

Padmé checked the co-ordinates against the nav computer's programming and found them to be exact. Satisfied, she began to read once more.

Bring no additional weapons, and no modified transports for anything except your fighter. If we scan the ship you arrive in and are not satisfied with it, you will be shot down. I look forward to this meeting.

It was unsigned.

Padmé frowned. The message was Quick, short and direct. It didn't fit any of the General's styles she knew. Shutting off the console, she slid back into the co-pilot's seat and placed her feet on the main console, crossing them at the ankle. Asajj's mysterious friend remained a mystery. Or at least, would continue to remain a mystery for another handful of hours.

Forewarned was forearmed, however, and she wasn't going to walk into this encounter unarmed or unaware. Asajj's contact was an individual placed in a position of power within the Empire itself. It was an ally Padmé had never dared to court and one she hadn't dreamed of obtaining. If things worked out as she hoped, they would have an inside line to information that would allow.

"Padmé; we are here."

The insistent voice woke her from a nap she hadn't been aware she'd taken. Sitting up straight, she winced, feeling the stiffness in her joints. "What happened?"

"You have been sleeping." Asajj was regarding her with a closed expression Padmé couldn't read. "You were perhaps more tired than you realized?"

Rubbing her neck, Padmé couldn't deny that assessment. Despite the crick and the aches, she'd slept better than she had in weeks — which only reinforced her conviction that trusting Asajj was the right thing. Checking the time, she saw that it was past midnight — and their entire journey had taken far less time than she'd anticipated. "Where are we?"

Asajj nodded to the viewport as she turned her attention back to the controls. They were vectoring alongside a massive ship Padmé couldn't recognize from their angle. "This is where we will meet my friend. Are you ready?"

"Do I have much choice?"

"If you wish to freshen up, now is the time."

"I'm not here to court anything by your friend's cooperation, Asajj. I'm ready."

"Very well."

No other words were spoken as the shuttle dipped lower and spun over, straight towards a the giant maw of one of the larger ship's hangar decks. They passed through the magnetic curtain and the Force Adept maneuvered the shuttle towards an open space. Techs scurried out of the way as she made the approach and gently set the ship down. The engines and systems were then placed into stand by — the only concession Asajj had made to Padmé's concerns — before Asajj spun away from the console.

The hatchway to the shuttle opened and lowered as the Force Adept's fingers depressed the controls. The Force Adept glanced at Padmé and then stepped onto the ramp. Determined to present a solidified front, Padmé stepped down beside her. They walked down together, their strides almost matching; Padmé careful to keep her hands well away from her blaster despite the fact Asajj had one hand casually draped across the hilt of one blade.

In unison, Asajj and Padmé turned from the shuttle and Asajj led the way from the deck proper. Moving into one of the corridors, they stopped, Asajj placing one hand on Padmé's

shoulder to halt her forward momentum. The sound of several pairs of boot heels striking the deck plating could be heard approaching and Padmé inhaled deeply, straightening her shoulders as she gave them a roll to loosen them up.

This was it. This was the big one; the high score. This was her chance to bring stage two of her plan into fruition. Asajj propelled her forward again, stepping up to a hatchway that separated them from the other corridor, and palmed it open. A hiss of steam escaped and then the door shot open. The two women stepped through together — and stopped.

Then, Asajj did something completely unexpected. She bowed, plucking Padmé’s blaster from its holster at the same time and tossing it across the deck. It spun and slid, coming to a stop before a pair of perfectly polished black boots.

“I have brought her as you asked, Master.”

“Well done, my apprentice.”

Padmé’s breathing caught in her throat, her eyes widening at the sight before her, unable to comprehend what she was hearing and seeing. A charming smile and the flash of even, white teeth registered at almost the same time as the clarity of the blue in his eye color as those familiar orbs met hers.

Vader.

“Hello, Wife.”

Month Twenty Three, Day 30 PEF, noon

Chapter 17

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Three, Day Thirty PEF

The silence that descended into the room was almost eerie as Vader stood before Padmé, watching her.

Waiting.

"Bastard!"

The word escaped Padmé's lips, hissing with such venom that Vader arched his eyebrows in total surprise. Spinning, she shoved Asajj, reaching for her lightsaber. The green blade sprang to life, barely missing the Force Adept as it was tugged free from her belt.

Asajj rolled back to her feet, but Padmé's target wasn't her.

Padmé saw red as her stomach sank to her toes and blind rage exploded before her eyes. It had been a set up. A trap. Asajj had betrayed her to the very person they both claimed to hate so much. Asajj was Vader's apprentice! With an unintelligible roar of anger, she lunged at Vader. Red crossed green as Padmé brought the blade down in an uncontrolled over handed chop.

Blocked, she lunged again, this time trying to swing in from the side.

"Padmé!"

She registered the command in the tone and the voice that spoke it, but she didn't heed it. *"I'll kill you!"*

The blade came down once more.

Vader grasped her wrist just below where the hilt of Asajj's lightsaber touched it and squeezed, spinning Padmé in a quick movement that brought her flush against his chest, her hand holding the lightsaber crossed across her back, the other pinned to her body. The lightsaber was pointed harmlessly away from him while his own was a hair breadth from her neck. He hadn't thought about the maneuver — he'd simply done it, and pulled back before striking the killing stroke.

Annoyed, and a little frustrated — she'd attacked him without provocation! — he looked down at her sternly. *"That's enough!"*

Padmé glared up at him, her brown eyes shooting daggers, a deep, burning hatred simmering in their depths. Tossing her head a little, Vader eased the lightsaber blade back fractionally so she didn't injure herself. She didn't notice, her low, spiteful words a challenge. *"Go ahead. You'll like me when I'm dead."*

Like her better dead? Was she daft? He hadn't risked everything from his standing with the Emperor to his life simply to kill her. Why did she think he'd called her when he'd found out about her existence? Squeezing, his fingers dug into the tendons of her wrist and Asajj's lightsaber dropped from a hand gone too numb to hold it. That the pain he inflicted wasn't represented in her eyes was a touch unsettling. Not that she would know that.

"On the contrary, *wife*," he told her pointedly, glaring back, "I'll like you much better alive."

"I wouldn't bet on that!"

The red blade deactivated and his grip on her eased. Padmé pulled violently out of his grasp and he let her go despite the condescending little smirk that played about her lips. His gaze never leaving her face — a face he'd dreamed about since he was a boy — he raised his voice. "Lieutenant."

Two stormtroopers stepped forward. "Yes sir?"

"Cuff her."

Padmé struggled, but Asajj stepped in, lifting one hand and closing her fingers. Padmé's struggles stopped as her body went suddenly immobile. Vader crossed his arms over his chest, waiting, as the stormtroopers cuffed his wife, tapping his lightsaber hilt against his cheek. The troopers stood back, taking one of Padmé's arms each as Asajj released her Force hold. With their spare hands they stripped her of a second blaster and vibro knife on her belt.

Vader stepped forward, looking down into Padmé's face and smiled. It was a smile she remembered, and one that was slightly mischievous despite its darker connotations. "Lieutenant."

"Sir?"

"Take her to my quarters and stand guard until I arrive."

"What?!"

"Yes sir. Would you like us to leave her cuffed?"

"That will not be necessary — once she is inside."

"You should put me in the brig." Padmé's venomous insistence was ignored, but she continued anyway. "I'll kill him with my bare hands if I have to!"

"Yes sir." The stormtroopers gripped Padmé more tightly to drag her away.

"Asajj!" Padmé struggled against their hold as she was hauled off down the corridor. "Asajj! Don't do this — don't trust him!"

Asajj didn't so much as look her way as the stormtroopers dragged her around a corner and through a hatchway, cutting off her screams. Extending one hand, she called the lightsaber Padmé had grabbed back to her and clipped it to her belt. "If you'll excuse me, Master, I would like to retrieve my fighter from the shuttle craft."

Vader waved her away. "Download the shuttle's database into the main computer and correlate the information with that we know on her group."

“Are we going to attack?”

“That,” he told her as he turned to depart, “will depend entirely on what my wife has to say.”

Vader returned to his quarters to find the stormtroopers standing guard outside his quarters as ordered. The troopers saluted before resuming their pose. “Lieutenant?”

“She is within, sir.”

“Excellent. She is not to leave this room. A guard detail is to be posted at all times with a two hour rotation. See to it.”

“Yes sir.”

Vader palmed open the door — and found it locked. A flicker of annoyance crossed his features as he reached out and touched the access panel. His fingers flew across it and over rode the minor lock out in moments. What was wrong with her? She should be happy to see him, not trying to keep him out.

The door slid open silently and he stepped inside. Darkness closed in about him, lit only by the faint starlight through the viewports beyond. A wave of his hand fingers turned on the lights in the main entry way and living area, illuminating the sofas, chairs and coffee table. The kitchen to the left cast shadows, but there was no sign of his wife.

Striding through the room, he frowned and opened his mouth to call for her when the sound and sizzle of a blaster bolt erupted through the air. Pure reflex saved him as he ducked and spun, putting his back to the wall between the kitchen and the living room at a corner which turned into an almost L shape — his viewing ‘lounge’. That bolt had come from there — the area that led towards his office.

“Padmé?”

There was no answer, not even the rustling of a fabric, or the cry of anger he was half expecting after her outburst and glare in the corridor. Listening closely, he could make out the angry, gasping inhalations that were far more indicative of her mood than her words. He reviewed what he knew of his suite and mentally noted the locations of the long couch, book shelf, lighting and chair. From the angle, she’d moved one of them to hide behind.

Beyond the corner, Padmé lined up with his voice, adrenaline and fury lending her strength she’d before lacked. She had to get away and she had to get away now. Vader was in her way; she was cornered and alone. Behind enemy lines and trapped by the very enemy she sought to destroy. If she stayed, he might very well destroy her.

“Padmé!”

Her finger squeezed on the trigger.

Vader’s lightsaber snapped to life as he turned the corner to look for her and another bolt arrowed in straight at his face. The reflex was automatic and unconscious. The bolt was deflected upwards, into the ceiling, and even as it was, his other hand came out, extending towards her, and the small hold out blaster was torn from her grasp to land solidly in his.

“NO!”

Vader stared at her, the illumination from the lightsaber casting his face in a red halo, completely unable to comprehend this wild woman who looked like his wife. “Stop this foolishness.”

“*Murderer!*” She lunged for him, screaming, her fists aimed at his midsection.

The lightsaber and blaster hit the ground as he shifted his stance to try and deflect her blow, to capture her against him. But Padmé was like a woman possessed. With a strength he hadn’t known she carried, she swung at him, connecting with his side. It stung his pride almost as much as it bruised the flesh around the impact site. He deflected her next blow with his forearm, completely unprepared for the onslaught. “Enough!”

“*I’ll kill you!*”

Vader backed away but Padmé followed, totally focused on inflicting some kind of damage. Padmé ducked as he reached to grab her, her fist diving into his thigh, and Vader’d had enough. With a fluid, swift movement — something no normal human could have accomplished — he had he pinned against the wall, his hands around her wrists, the backs of her hands flat against the surface above her head.

Flush against her for the second time in less than an hour, he found the circumstances less than ideal. Yes, he wanted her with him, but not like this! “What’s wrong with you?”

“It’s you! You ask what’s wrong? Everything I had — gone, *because of you!*” The bitterness of her words caught him off guard.

“And that gives you reason to try and kill me?”

“I’d rather you were dead so I don’t have to be stuck here with you.”

Anger and hurt simmered to the surface and she might as well have slammed her knee into his gut for the impact of her words. She didn’t *want* to be here with him? He pushed the hurt aside. “Sorry to disappoint you, *Jedi Hunter*, but I’m very much alive and I plan on keeping it that way. Just like I plan on you never leaving my side again.”

“You’re mad if you think I’m going to stay here with you.”

“You don’t have a choice, *dear wife*, or did you forget who you are?”

If she could have hit him again she would have. She tried to knee him, but Vader simply stepped closer, taking any force out of the strike and bringing their bodies completely flush — and the memories that went with it. Stung by action as much as his words — and her own reaction to their position despite the circumstance, she tossed her head and glared at him. Succinctly, her teeth gritted against the urge to scream the denial, she annunciated carefully. “I am *not* your wife.”

“The marriage license is still intact.” His head lowered, his voice turning deadly soft. “You are very much my wife, Padmé.”

“I’m married to Anakin Skywalker, not this... *monster* who took his place!”

“*You are my wife*, and it is going to stay that way.”

“Never. I’ll kill you before I ever agree to that.”

Vader's lips twisted into a sardonic, haughty smirk. A smirk she remembered far too well — from better times. "Just like all those other times you tried...and failed?"

Padmé flinched, unable to help herself, the dual betrayal of the evening coming back full force. Not only had Asajj betrayed her to Vader, but Asajj had also apparently informed him of certain situations. Situations involving him. What else had the Force Adept told him? Schooling her features, she tried to hide the reaction, but Vader's knowing look and haughty tone told her just how miserably she failed.

"Oh, I know about all about them. I know about each time you tried but couldn't pull the trigger."

Glaring at him and *wishing* him dead, or condemned to the ninth level of the Corellian Hell weren't having any effect, but neither could she find her voice. What could she say to that? Was there *anything* she could say to that? He spoke nothing but the truth; ten times she'd tried, and ten times she'd failed to pull the trigger. If not for the practice range, she might not even know her rifle worked.

Vader shifted her hands from both of his to one and slid his finger tips down over the soft skin of her arm. They caressed the lines of her fingers, the soft skin at her wrist, down over the defined muscles of her forearm and over the slight swell of her triceps. Her arm quivered and jerked at his touch, but she couldn't escape it. "You say you want me dead but I don't think you do."

His grip shifted and she twisted her head, trying to avoid the touch as his hand slid to her cheek bone and then down across her cheek. Gently, far more gently than she'd expected, his hand cupped her face. She stared at him as his face neared, stopping just shy of being nose to nose, and his words turned husky, "In fact, I think you want me very much alive."

Padmé saw his intention in his eyes and wrenched her face as far to the side as she could. She would bite him if he tried to kiss her — tear his lips right off. She'd—

Vader's lips brushed softly against her cheek.

She reacted without thinking, her whole body bucking as she tried to throw him off. She wouldn't submit to this, wouldn't allow it, she—

Vader let her go. Stepping back, a soft chuckle escaped his lips as she trembled before him, using the wall for support and her hands came up in a defensive position. Her glare never changed as Vader called his lightsaber and her holdout blaster to his hand. Turning his back on her, he clipped his saber back to his belt and headed back towards the door, stopping to look at her only when he'd reached it.

He flipped the holdout blaster in his hand and smiled. "We have much to discuss, Padmé. I suggest you make yourself comfortable."

Padmé watched the door close behind him and reached for the first thing at hand — only to come up empty. She screamed incoherently before sinking down along the wall and burying her face in her hand as she thrust her fingers into her hair and squeezed. The urge, the *need*, to throw something was almost overwhelming.

Breathe.

The word popped into her mind as she tried to catch her breath, the soothing tone of the trainer's voice a calming balm to a tortured spirit. Doing as the voice instructed, she inhaled deeply to calm the racing of her heart and regain her focus.

Captured and locked in Vader's quarters; it was her worst nightmare come true. Her grip on her hair eased and she slowly let her hands fall back into her lap, stretching her legs out before her. There was time before Vader would return, time to formulate a plan of attack and defense. Time to figure out just what she could do to escape. Because escape she would.

That she wouldn't, or *couldn't*, was to terrible a fate to contemplate. Somehow she would regain her freedom and find her children. If she could eliminate Vader in the process, all the better.

Month Twenty Three, Day 30 PEF, evening

Chapter 18

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Three, Day Thirty PEF

Padmé prowled through Vader's quarters after she'd found her composure, keeping an ear open for the door as she checked her new cage. Without her blaster — the only weapon she'd had against him — she would need to find another way to strike out at him.

Her search revealed an opulent bed chamber, decadent in its trappings and not at all like the bunk she'd known him to have at the Jedi Temple; a way to distance himself from that part of his past? A 'fresher next to the bedroom was across the hall from a small kitchenette. The 'fresher had yielded nothing helpful, though there were knives in the kitchen she could use in a heartbeat.

Between the kitchen, 'fresher and bedroom was a large sitting area that was furnished for entertaining. Who or what she didn't know. Around the corner, where she'd had her second showdown with Vader, was a viewing area. A large viewport showed the stars as they passed through hyperspace and two couches had been set up to take advantage of the view. Holonovel and display cases were in two corners, but neither had anything that looked remotely like a weapon.

The wall opposite the viewing port held a locked door she had yet to pick. Eventually, when she was calmer and certain Vader wouldn't be walking back in at any second, she would attempt some of the tricks Max had shown her.

Max.

Taking a deep breath, she steadied herself at the thought of her companion. He'd be worried about her, about their agreement — but would he search for her? She hoped not even as a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach told her otherwise. Max *would* look for her, and he'd probably find her — but what would he think then? He didn't know to whom she'd been married and he would only put himself in danger if he came looking for her.

Frustration simmered at the edges of her temper as she mentally reviewed what she'd found in Vader's quarters — and came up with nothing that could even remotely be a comm. station. Somehow she had to get a message to Max, to warn him to disappear, to not come looking for her. She had to tell him—

"Padmé?"

She'd missed the sound of the door opening. Cursing silently, she straightened her spine, turning her back to the door and taking the step necessary to put her behind one of the couches. Bracing both hands on the back of it, she stared out the viewport as her fingers dug into the fabric of the sofa.

“Padmé, didn’t you hear me call you?”

Vader’s stern tone brokered no disobedience — but she wasn’t in the mood to obey. Ignoring him, she continued to stare at the star lines when all she wanted at that moment was the strength to lift the piece of furniture so she could bash him over the head with it. But, if wishes were speeders... Vader started towards her and she counted his measured steps, opening her mouth to speak when she was certain he was close enough to reach for her.

“Touch me and I’ll break every bone in your hand.”

“You can’t still be angry.”

Eyes with less warmth than Hoth at its coldest turned to meet his blue orbs. “I’ve been taken hostage and locked in the one place in the galaxy I have no wish to be with a monster.”

“Then perhaps it would do you well to show a little fear.”

Tossing her head, she finally straightened to look at him. “Showing fear to an animal only gets you injured and I have no intention of being its next victim.”

“Stop it, Padmé.”

“Then let me go.”

“Never.” That smug smile reappeared. “I’ve been searching for you for a long time, wife; I don’t intend to let you escape.”

“I’m *not* your wife.”

Vader waved one hand as if to dismiss her protest, ignoring her retort. “It’s late and you’ve had a long day — you must be tired.”

“I’m fine.”

“Suit yourself.”

To her surprise, Vader headed easily for his bedchamber, reaching up as he did so to loosen the ties on his cloak. His image passed beyond her view, only his reflection in the view port giving her any indication as to his progress. The cloak was removed and she was forced to fight down a wave of nostalgia that struck out of the blue as she watched him reach for the closures on the glove of his artificial hand. It was a move she’d loved to see, a sign of complete and utter trust — a sign that he could just *be* without the trappings people expected to see in a Jedi.

I will not think about that, she told herself sternly. *This isn’t Anakin, but a demon wearing his face!*

Averting her gaze, Padmé looked beyond the viewport to the stars once more, and focused her thoughts inward, reminding herself that she was Vader’s prisoner. That it was because of *Vader* she wasn’t with Max and her rag tag band of rebels. That it was because of *Vader* she’d lost her chance to strike back at the Alliance, to make them pay for their arrogance. That it was because of *Vader* she’d...

“Are you coming to bed?”

The question was phrased so ridiculously *normal* she couldn't help but turned to look at him — and stare. The image that greeted her wasn't the monster who haunted her dreams and stole her children, nor was it the crimson bladed wielding demon who'd massacred the Jedi temple. The image before her was one she remembered well, in her dreams of better times — and she felt a stirring she'd hoped never to feel again with the sight.

Bare-chested, bare footed and dressed in only his long sleep shorts, Vader looked entirely too much like the Anakin Skywalker she'd once loved. His muscled chest was still well defined, evidence his physical training hadn't slackened with his change of allegiance, his arms looked as strong as she remembered with a musculature her fingers itched to trace. The ridges of his stomach begged to be explored, to be *tasted* and she swallowed to get moisture back into a mouth suddenly bone dry.

That muscled torso was suddenly closer than she recalled it being a moment ago as she snapped back into the present to find Vader standing before her. There was amusement in his gaze along with the arrogance of a man who knows he's wanted — he'd caught her ogling him.

"See something you like?"

Angry with him for tempting her, and with herself for being tempted, she tossed her head and crossed her arms over her chest defiantly. "Not a thing."

"Liar."

He moved closer and Padmé's regard turned wary as she took a half step back, falling into a semi-defensive posture. "Stay away from me."

"It's bed time," he told her smugly, stepping deliberately closer. "That means, dear wife that we retire — together."

"Never."

He took another step, stalking her, and she retreated. "Never is a long time."

"Not long enough." Rounding the sofa, she placed it as an obstacle between them. "I'll sleep fine right here."

"Stop this nonsense, Padmé." Vader frowned, crossing his arms over his chest and drawing her attention once more to the musculature which had initially caught her interest. "You're my wife; you'll sleep with me."

"If you think, for one second, that I'll submit to you, you're sadly mistaken. You're not touching me with a ten foot gaffi staff."

"Enough of this." Losing his patience, Vader cheated as she made to dart away. Padmé let out a shriek of rage as she was caught in an invisible hold and yanked off the ground. Struggling, she flailed against the Force grip.

"Let me go!"

"It will only get worse the more you fight it," His tone was almost conversation as the pressure against her squeezed a little, tightening as she struggled against it — against him. "It's better to give in, wife"

“Never!” Gritting her teeth, Padmé clenched her fists and tried to punch him, to kick him, but Vader stood well out of harm’s way, casually walking towards her as she floated backwards in an unknown direction. “Using the Force when you can’t get your way is low, even for you, Vader!”

“Ah ah, temper temper.” He stepped through the doorway she’d just passed through, a faint smile playing about his lips. “This is for your own good, Padmé.”

“My own good would be best served by my freedom from yo-ack!”

The Force grip released, dropping her to the opulent mattress she’d seen in his bedchamber earlier that evening, and landing her in the center of it. Rolling, she dropped off the mattress on the far side and glared at her nemesis from across the bed. Opening her mouth to speak drew another outraged scream as he caught her in his Force grip once more and yanked her none too gently back onto the bed.

Rolling once again with the momentum, she crashed into Vader on the near side to the door. He caught her, the reflex purely instinctual to keep her from hurting herself, only to find she didn’t want his help. Padmé shrieked unintelligibly at him, struggling against his hold even as he strove to keep a hold of her. The scuffle that ensued had them rolling against the edge of the mattress until Padmé was able to get the upper hand for a split second and Vader got an unexpected knee in the groin

With a groan, he let her go, curling in on himself as he sought to ease the sudden agony in his nether regions.

Breathing heavily, Padmé retreated towards the door, watching as he glared at her, those blue eyes she remembered so well accusing her of cheating in her own way. Glaring right back, she gripped the door frame for support as she struggled against the urge to wrap her fingers around his neck and the knowledge that she’d never get that far. If she re-entered his room, she wouldn’t be leaving; she could see it in his eyes.

Undaunted, she straightened. “I may be your captive and weaponless but you’d better sleep with one eye open and pray you locked up your saber because — the moment it closes — you might not open them again!”

Speechless, Vader watched her walk away, unable to doubt the sincerity in her tone — or the sudden understanding that the knee she’d so expertly placed on his person to escape had been deliberate. Straightening slowly, he rolled himself onto the mattress he’d been anticipating sharing with her since she’d been brought on board, and stared at the ceiling as pain continued to radiate through his system, forcing him to use a technique to dissipate it as he turned over the events of the last few minutes.

What had happened to his wife?

The pain gradually faded away, ebbing as the thought whirled around and around in his head, replaying the scenes of the day like a broken holo recorder. Padmé’s initial reaction at seeing him; drawing Asajj’s saber and attacking him; her hostility in their suite; her reaction to the idea of sleeping with him.

Vader had never once considered that his wife wouldn’t *want* to be with him. He hadn’t considered that she blamed him in any way shape or form for whatever had occurred in her

life since their parting. Wondering what had happened since he'd last seen her on Mustafar that had changed her so drastically and warped her thinking about him. He'd done nothing, nothing except try to keep her and their child safe.

Their child.

What had happened to him or her? Padmé hadn't been with them and Asajj had made no mention of Padmé with a child. Had she lost the baby? The very thought sent a shiver through his system, settling about his heart like an icy glove. Was that why she blamed him for her troubles, because she'd lost the child they'd created together? He couldn't very well blame her if that was the case, or if his actions had somehow brought it about.

Still, she didn't react like a woman submerged in grief; she acted like a woman with purpose. Whatever that purpose was — which appeared to include his demise — he didn't know exactly. But he did intend to find out. She wouldn't be leaving, wouldn't be going anywhere without his expressed say so, and he would pry the answers from her somehow.

Rolling to his side, he closed his eyes — and stared blankly at the black wall of his eyelids, his thoughts continuing to tumble and roll over one another as he attempted to reconcile his loving wife with the woman in the next room. She wasn't as she'd left him, and yet she was. Padmé was still the same beautiful, willful, spirited woman he'd fallen in love with at the age of nine and then again at nineteen. She was still the same determined, scrappy young lady who refused to take captivity sitting down.

And he remembered well their time on Geonosis — she'd freed herself before either he or — shying away from the thought, he turned his focus back to his wife, rolling over again in an attempt to find a comfortable position.

The unexpected had occurred when she'd been delivered to him in more ways than one, the most puzzling of them being her reaction to him. He didn't understand it, no matter how he rationalized it, and yet, at the same time, it didn't matter. Padmé was here! She was with him again, at his side where she belonged even if she didn't yet see it that way.

Needing to see her again — and very aware of the fact he wouldn't be able to sleep until he did so — Vader rolled from his bed and padded back into the living area on silent, bare feet. The lights had been dimmed to an almost nonexistent glow, the starlight from the viewports lending their shine to his path as he made his way towards the corner of the living area that Padmé had claimed; the corner where the door to his office remained locked and would continue to remain that way for the foreseeable future.

A soft sound caught his attention and he froze, checking this way and that, his senses primed for danger — but finding none. Instead, the gentle inhalation that had drawn his attention, confirmed the sleeping arrangement of choice for his wife. She lay curled around one of his pillows, one hand under her cheek, and her hair spilling haphazardly over her shoulders. Even breathing belied the deepness of her slumber and he simply stared at her, seeing her at peace for the first time since their reunion late that afternoon.

There were new lines on her face, cut from worry and strain, which relaxed only partially in sleep. Her mouth had lost the harsh edge, revealing it to be as full and tempting as he remembered in his dreams. The curve of her cheek drew him unerringly and, without thinking, he traced the curve of it with the tips of his fingers, needing to feel its softness.

Padmé didn't so much as stir at the touch, so faint was it, and Vader drew the backs of his fingers down across the curve, unable to resist temptation.

Her brow puckered this time and she tilted her head, as if uncertain what to do about the touch.

Unwilling to risk waking her — Vader had seen the signs of exhaustion despite her attempts to hide them — he withdrew his hand reluctantly. Kneeling behind the sofa, he crossed his arms over the back and stared down at her, the events of the day once more replaying in his mind as he marveled at the change in her.

Here, watching her sleep, he took in the physical changes aside from the new strain lines. There was a line of silver in her hair — something he hadn't noticed before — and it was a single strand that ran through the bangs on the left side of her head to curl over her ear. Her body was harder than he remembered, bringing to mind the feel of her against him when he'd pinned her earlier that day. Before he'd just been delighted to have her against him once more and now — looking back — he could analyze the changes. She was toned, more so than when she'd been the Queen or when they'd been reunited and he'd been assigned as her bodyguard. No, now she was almost all muscle — enough muscle to rival even his level of training; but soft too. Pliable, he suspected, as she always had been in just the right places.

Her attire was new too... or rather, old. Worn and well used, the clothing was a far cry from what she'd been used to in her former positions. There were none of the elaborate bead or embroidery work and the simple hairstyle that was falling out was nothing compared to the up-dos she'd had as both Queen and Senator.

But he liked it.

This wholesome Padmé was, in some ways, far more reachable than the woman who'd been willing to serve her people devotedly. This woman had few ties, few responsibilities and didn't have the weight of a planet or a galactic senate resting on her shoulders. No, instead she'd shouldered the weight of a band of rebels and become a thorn *in* his side — knowingly — rather than be *at* his side. She'd take up a vendetta against him, something the woman he knew and loved would never do.

Shaking off the unpleasant thought, he tilted his head, continuing to watch her sleep, taking in every breath, every sigh like a man too long without water. Just having her near, knowing that she was at his side once again — even if it was currently as an unwilling captive — was enough for now. He had time to show her what she'd been missing, to remind her of what they'd shared; to prove that things could only be better than they'd ever been since they no longer had to hide from the Jedi and exist on stolen moments.

No, this time she could remain at his side always and he intended to keep her there.

Sleep finally beckoned as his eyelids began to feel too heavy to keep open. Not wanting her to find him on the floor behind the couch in the morning, Vader reluctantly rose to his feet, taking one last, long look at his peacefully sleeping wife and wishing she was ensconced in his bed rather than on the couch. Daring, he bent over the back of the couch to brush a whisper soft kiss over her cheek.

"Soon, my love," he promised softly. "Soon you'll remember and the will no longer be this distance between us."

Month Twenty Three, Day 31 PEF, early

Chapter 19

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Three, Day Thirty One PEF

Waking from an intermittent sleep early the following morning, Vader checked the chrono on his night table and made a soft sound of disgust. It was far too early after a late, and mostly sleepless, night but for one boon. His wife was here. True, she hadn't yet been receptive to the idea and claimed she still desired to kill him, but it was bluster. He'd felt her yield to him yesterday when he'd had her pinned against the wall, and there'd been no mistaking the *interest* in her gaze when he'd emerged from his bedchamber to retrieve her.

Her look had been a near physical thing and he'd yearned to hold her like he'd once done — only she was less than receptive. A flinch twisted his features as he remembered just how unreceptive, and vowed to keep his guard up against her knees. He didn't need another painful reminder of her disposition. A good night's sleep would have improved her outlook and this morning, and he felt it would bring the reunion he'd been anticipating.

Rolling from his bed, he arched his back and reached for the ceiling as the satisfying cracks and pops of the tension releasing pinged through the room. The release was enough to renew him momentarily before stepping from his bedroom. He'd hoped Padmé would still be sleeping so he could wake her, but was woefully disappointed to find her not only awake, but having taken up a position that would — in the weeks to come — become a daily ritual.

Standing in profile to him, her hair still tumbling in a riot of curls about her face and shoulders, her posture was stiffly erect, belied as defensive only by the way she had her arms crossed and seemed to be hugging herself. Stepping towards the alcove she seemed intent on claiming as her own, he smiled. "Good morning."

Her features tightened in obvious displeasure and the blood suddenly drained from her fingers as the pressure increased incrementally on her arms. Other than the physical signs that she'd heard him, she didn't so much as look at him, nor did she respond.

"I said, good morning Padmé. Did you sleep well?"

A clipped note had worked its way into his voice and it brought her head around slowly, her brown eyes coolly disinterested. Her gaze remained on him for a half second before turning deliberately back to the stars beyond, the gesture a clear dismissal.

It piqued his temper the way a scathing remark couldn't have. Any hope he'd harbored for a more congenial reunion that morning was quashed. Padmé was as coolly distant as she'd been the night before, only this time she had the memory of his behavior the previous night as ammunition and the contempt in her gaze was unmistakable.

"I see you've learned your place at last."

“My place,” she spat softly, refusing to look at him, “is as far away from *you* as I can possibly get.”

So... she was still in a foul mood this morning. Feeling charitable — she hadn’t, after all left his chambers — he attributed it to her having spent the night on the sofa rather than in his bed; where she belonged. Had she slept beside him as he’d intended, neither of them would be as tense as they were this morning — but then, they wouldn’t have been out of bed yet had he had his way.

“Whatever you’re thinking, you can forget it. I’d sooner die than cooperate.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, Vader narrowed his gaze. “I have no intention of seeking your death, Padmé; quite the opposite in fact.”

“We were both better off when you were!”

The vehemence in her words spurred him into action. Vaulting the couch in the blink of an eye, he grabbed her about the shoulders angrily, spinning her towards him. “Don’t say that!”

“Why not?” Her challenge was spiteful and defiant. “It’s the truth, isn’t it?”

“I never wanted *you* dead.”

“You have a funny way of showing it,” glaring at him, she completely ignored the pain that lurked behind the anger in his blue orbs. “First with the Force choke—”

“That’s enough.”

Ignoring his sharp command, she continued. “-and then with the bounty on my head, it’s a —”

“Silence!”

“—wonder I survived to be your captive at all.”

Despite his very real anger, Vader felt a sense of pride for her defiance — until she continued with a cutting barb that struck a nerve.

“At least when I was dead you could go about your murdering ways without the burden of pretending to be something you’re not!”

Releasing her before he gave into the temptation to shake her — or worse — Vader spun on the ball of his foot and walked away, violently shoving the sofa from his path as he did. He got two steps before he whirled to face her, his hands clenched at his sides lest he reach for her again to do something rash. Pain, remembered pain, streaked through his frame as he recalled exactly how stricken the news of her death had made him.

“I never pretended to be something I wasn’t,” he told her succinctly, those ice blue orbs pinning her with their intensity and rendering her silent. “Not once did I want you dead, Padmé. Not *once* did I specifically hunt you down to kill you because when I learned of the Jedi Hunter, I had been previously informed of your death. I thought you were dead. I was told you had died from the injuries *I* had inflicted; that you had died because of *me*.”

There was something in his low speech, a quaver in his words as he spoke of her death, that echoed the pain and powerlessness she remembered so well in Anakin — especially the

night he'd dreamed of her death in child birth. It was a poignant memory, and one she ruthlessly slammed the door on. "You were obviously misinformed."

"I watched your funeral!" The raw *agony* in those words would have been humbling had she harbored any kind of remaining *tenderness* for him.

"Then you're as gullible as the rest of the galaxy," she spat, deliberately cruel in her response. She didn't want to feel anything for him, to be reminded of what he'd once been. Vader was *not* Anakin, no matter that they shared the same face. "My funeral was obviously faked."

"*Obviously*," he returned the word tightly, more emotions than she believed he still possessed flitting across his features; emotions Padmé chose to ignore. "For the benefit of the Empire no doubt."

"For *your* benefit," the correction was barbed and dripping with disdain. "Because of you, everyone had to pretend I was dead. Meanwhile I lay in a coma for months! Something I'm sure you didn't know. But then how could you? You, and the rest of the galaxy, thought — *believed* — I was dead!" Padmé trembled from the anger she felt pulsing through her body.

"If I had known then you were alive I would have done everything in my power to find you and make sure you were all right," Vader returned hotly.

"Why? So you could take more away from me than you already had?" Her words were cruel but Padmé didn't care. She wanted Vader to feel how angry she was. "Because of *you*, I lost everything, Vader. Everything I worked for, everything I believed in was destroyed — *because of you*! And I died right along with it but that didn't matter to you, did it."

"Yes it did. I can't believe you think your death meant nothing!"

"It did mean nothing!"

Vader stared at her incredulous, shocked that she had the gall to accuse him of being unfeeling before his expression darkened and he took a step back towards her. His eyes, unbeknownst to him, held a mute appeal, a need for understanding and acceptance that had been lacking since he'd donned the mantle of Sith Lord.

Vestiges of Anakin still existed inside the Sith Lord and one of those came to the forefront in an unconscious appeal to have her acknowledge his pain. "You're wrong Padmé. While recovering from the incident on Mustafar, *you* were the only thought in my mind and the Emperor... told me you had died. If I had thought the loss of my mother was staggering, it was *nothing* compared to the knowledge that I had lost *you*."

"*Anakin* lost me the moment he stopped believing in me and what we fought for; what we lived for." Padmé crossed her arms over her chest, unmoved by his impassioned admission as she turned her back to look out the viewport once more in clear dismissal. "I never belonged to *you*, Vader; and I never will."

Rejection was not something that happened in Vader's sphere of influence and as quickly as those tendrils of Anakin had appeared, they vanished, slammed shut within the darkness once more as Vader straightened his shoulders and stared at the back of her head in dark amusement. She was still the same spirited beauty he remembered — though he didn't remember her *ever* being this stubborn.

“One day soon, *wife*, you will come to realize that everything about your welfare matters to me; as such, you are *mine*.”

He ignored the indignant flash in her eyes as she whirled to face him once more and smirked, satisfied he’d gotten the last word in as he turned and strode back into the bedroom. Vader’s smirk disappeared the moment he crossed the threshold. How dare she imply her death had meant nothing to him? She knew nothing of the self-inflicted torment he’d put himself through, the agony of never having an answer to a very crucial question.

Had he killed her by his rash actions on Mustafar?

Vader stepped out of view towards his armoire and slid it open viciously, the door warping from the force of his push and getting stuck in the track. Another violent strike sent it into the slit in the wall it was supposed to have retracted into. Staring blindly at the contents of the closet, the turmoil raging through his system refused to be capped.

The blinding, searing agony of her death had been almost crippling, driving him to his knees and resulted in a force wave so potent it had shattered the durasteel walls of the medical bay and killed twelve staff members working in the area. That was before Emperor Palpatine had dampened the effects, unable — or unwilling — to nullify it completely. The force of his grief had been felt throughout the complex and the surrounding city blocks.

Emperor Palpatine had given him focus after that, a target to seek out and destroy — other than the Jedi. Padmé’s death had been blamed on the insurgent’s inability to nurse her through the traumas she’d endured and her pregnancy was never mentioned.

A familiar tightening in his gut at the thought of his child — of *their* child — was what brought him back to reality and lent him focus. He needed to speak with Asajj regarding that particular issue before he confronted his wife. Padmé was still angry with him, driven by misplaced desperation to escape him, and he doubted she’d be inclined to answer anything he might ask.

His path set, he traded his sleep shorts for the black clothing and cape that were as much a part of his image as his station. Turning from the closet and bending to collect his boots, a foreign article on his floor stopped him mid reach.

A velveteen pouch he’d never before seen lay crumpled haphazardly against the floor of his nightstand.

Opening his hand, he called the pouch to him, noting as it flew through the air that it was well used, patched with some kind of crude leather where it had been worn through. Curiously, he turned the pouch over, hearing something *clink* within. It wasn’t his. He didn’t own anything that shabby anymore and wouldn’t, for it reminded him too much of his upbringing, of what he’d been. He wasn’t ashamed of having been a slave, but it wasn’t something he was proud of either.

Only escaping that slavery had been something even remotely considered a triumph and that a bittersweet one.

Caressing the fabric, Vader knew immediately that it wasn’t his; it had to be Padmé’s. No one else dared enter his quarters and no one had been in his bedchamber; that he knew with

absolute certainty. None would dare his wrath should they be caught. The *clink* within the pouch drew his attention back to it and he carefully opened it — and stared.

Nestled within the darkness was a familiar piece of japor, two holes drilled at the top and a crack down the center of a symbol meant to bring good fortune.

Unexpectedly, he was hurtled back to when he'd given it to her, their conversation echoing in his head.

"Are you all right?"

"It's very cold."

Padmé had, without pause, ensured that didn't remain for very long, her natural caring for others bringing her to his rescue — once again. "You're from a warm planet, Ani. Too warm for my taste. Space is cold."

"You seem sad."

"The Queen is... worried. Her people are suffering... dying. She must convince the Senate to intervene, or... I'm not sure what will happen."

"I'm... I'm not sure what's going to happen to me. I dunno if I'll ever see you again..." he'd pulled the snippet from his pocket and offered it, barely able to keep his hands from shaking and terrified she'd reject it. *"I made this for you. So you'd remember me. I carved it out of a japor snippet... It will bring you good fortune."*

When she'd accepted the pendant, his nine year old heart had just about soared — and then had with her words. "It's beautiful, but I don't need this to remember you. Many things will change when we reach the capital, Ani. My caring for you will always remain."

A myriad of emotions buffeted him at once: intense pleasure that she had kept it all this time, shock that she had let it become damaged in any way, and dismay that she no longer wore it as she had before their separation. Twisting it to get a better view, the piece unexpectedly parted along the crack and irrational anger swelled so swiftly it surprised even him. She'd broken it; broken the first present he'd ever given her — how dare she? As quickly as the anger swept through him, it passed and hurt throbbed through his chest, the conflicting emotions rollercoasting through his system.

Unexpectedly, he sat heavily on the edge of his bed, cradling the broken pieces of japor between his hands, staring at them intently. Hesitantly, he removed the first piece, running the polished surface between his fingers, the familiar feel of it making him smile without realizing it. Padmé had kept it, no matter the shape it was in, and a part of him was... touched.

It was thinner than he remembered, more worn, an indication of just how much handling the piece had been through. Was that why it had broken, not that Padmé had done it deliberately — but if she had, why? Did she hate him so much she couldn't stand the sight of it?

No, that couldn't be right. Running his thumb over the halved engraving, he considered it for a moment, fighting off the hurt that echoed the fear of his gift's rejection from so long

ago; he'd been terrified she wouldn't accept it. Shaking his head to clear it, he focused instead on the piece in his fingers.

If Padmé claimed to hate him so much, wouldn't she have simply discarded it? Why keep it, a reminder of everything she claimed to hate, of everything he'd become? He didn't know how she *could* have kept it and still claimed such vehement hatred of him.

Picking up the second piece, he carefully placed them side by side and examined the break in the center. It was deliberate. A twinge of hurt made itself known again and this time he let himself feel it rather than quash it outright. Padmé had deliberately broken the japor snippet. Why? What possible reason could she have for doing so and still keep it? The pouch was obviously something she kept close to her person — it smelled faintly of her — but why do so when she so vehemently denied any tender feelings for him at all? Why keep it when it was the most personal reminder she could have chosen — a reminder that held a significance beyond the obvious — unless she still loved him?

Did she still love him, was that what it meant?

On his feet in a heartbeat, the need to talk to her drove him to action. Striding purposefully into the living room to find out just what her having kept it meant, Vader found Padmé suspiciously absent. “Padmé?” Turning on the balls of his feet, he stretched out with his senses, searching for her — and found her behind a locked door using his shower.

Clenching his fist around the pieces of the japor snippet, he stared at the door to the 'fresher in silence, weighing his options. He could easily open it using the Force if he so chose, but a small voice in the back of his head cautioned against it. During their marriage she'd rarely denied him anything, but before... before she'd been as stubborn as she was now. Nothing would be solved by —

Beep beep.

Frowning, he snatched his comlink off his belt. “What is it Commander?”

“*My most abject apologies, Lord Vader, but your presence is required on the bridge.*” There was a pause and then— “*It involves the... the rogues, sir.*”

“I'll be there momentarily, Commander.”

Flipping off the comlink, Vader stared at the door to the 'fresher for a half second before folding the pieces of japor back inside the pouch and tucking it into his own belt. There would be time to confront her on the issue of the snippet later and for now the mystery would keep. Turning his back on the door, he headed for the entrance to his quarters and ruthlessly suppressed the uncertainty that had sprung up upon finding the token.

No mercy.

No quarter.

No qualms.

Whatever emotions Padmé's little performance had inspired in the last eighteen hours were quashed ruthlessly and ignored. Vader was being called back into action for his Empire, a reprieve Padmé would revel in for only a short period of time. No matter his other duties, his

wife's safety had become his first priority and part of that safety was the necessity of her seeing that her circumstances were not about to change.

Month Twenty Three, Day 31 PEF, morning

Chapter 20

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Three, Day Thirty One PEF

Vader's time with the rogues took far less than even he'd suspected. Asajj was dispatched to deal with them *personally*, a task she was more than relishing as part of the intelligence they had on the rogues they sought implicated Jedi assistance. Leaving Asajj to her new toy, Vader returned to his quarters, stopping only to speak briefly with the guards posted outside the doors before ducking inside.

Padmé was nowhere to be found — once again — and the door to the 'fresher was still closed. The sound of the shower could no longer be heard, but whatever she was doing, Vader knew without a doubt part of this ruse was another way of her showing her displeasure. A way of her taking back some form of control in a situation where she had none.

Little did Vader know that behind the 'fresher door, Padmé stood with her back braced against it, staring at her reflection. The wan, drawn and pale creature looking back at her was a stranger, only the fire in her own brown orbs even remotely familiar. Vader had caught her off guard the night before with his high handed tactics. To be fair, she'd caught him off guard too — with her knee. A smug smile lit her features, but even as it crossed her lips, the twinge of guilt that had been nagging her all morning about that particular act reared its ugly head.

Deserving or not, crippling Vader wasn't on her agenda; she simply wanted him dead. A quick, painless execution for his crimes. She knew far too many people who would have preferred to see him maimed and suffering, but the previous night had unwittingly reminded her that Vader had already been maimed — many times — and she had no wish to cause another. His death, however... she had to kill him, if she didn't, she'd be his prisoner forever.

Of course, that round about logic reminded her once more of just how she'd become his prisoner and the sick feeling of betrayal had returned. Asajj had been working for Vader; for a man they both claimed to despise — only Asajj apparently didn't as much as she'd claimed. They'd been working together for a year... a whole blasted year; didn't Asajj have any kind of loyalty? They'd been through so much, risked their very lives for one another and this... this captivity by the very man Asajj had vowed to help Padmé kill was so ludicrous it was almost laughable.

Or would have been if Padmé hadn't been so very aware of her circumstances. Vader was Asajj's Master; she'd made that clear upon their arrival — but had Asajj been his apprentice all along or was it a recent development? If so, how recent — or had Asajj been playing her for a fool from the start? The idea that she could have been so blind to Asajj's duplicity from the beginning drove her from the 'fresher with a need to know the answers.

Asajj wouldn't be available for her to speak with — and the Force Adept wouldn't likely *want* to speak with her since she was now Vader's prisoner — but her captor had the answers she needed. Unlocking the door, she palmed it open and searched the suite, confident Vader would be nearby. He seemed disinclined to leave her a moment to herself and the reprieve she'd obtained by commandeering his 'fresher wouldn't last.

Despite the fact he had the answers she needed, the idea was distasteful. She wanted nothing to do with him and only necessity drove her to seek him out. As it was, she was in a foul mood from lack of sleep — she hadn't been able to sleep well for long — and Vader's little performance before she'd retired to the 'fresher had only made her more irritable.

Locating his broad shoulders — now cloaked in black from neck to toe — were more in line with her thoughts of Vader. Vader did *not* walk around in nothing but a pair of sleep shorts! The thought only blackened her mood further as she strode across the room towards the kitchenette where he was occupied doing something she couldn't see.

Stopping well out of his reach, she crossed her arms over her chest and spat the words at his back. "How long has Asajj been your apprentice?"

Vader continued to do whatever so occupied him at the small island in the kitchenette and Padmé taped her toe impatiently, glaring at the back of his head. "I know you heard me, *Lord Vader*."

Straightening to his full height, Vader slowly turned to face her, amusement written all over his features as he took in her still disheveled appearance. His words were patronizing. "I see a shower's done little to improve your disposition, perhaps if you'd actually used it..."

"Just answer my question." She sneered, ignoring the jibe. "How long has Asajj been your apprentice?!"

"About four or five months."

Her jaw went slack, her eyes widening in surprise as the room seemed to spin once and then stop, her throat closing as her chest contracted. Her breath left her in a silent *whoosh* as the words struck her like a physical blow. Four or five *months*. The knowledge was inconceivable, like being spoken to in a language one didn't understand — and yet the meaning was clear. Struggling with the information, she struggled to breathe. Her friend, her *ally* had been working for her worst enemy.

Vader's tone lost some of its patronizing edge. He was back in control of the situation and himself, attributing his lapse first thing that morning to lack of sleep. "Yes, unlike the year or so she's been working with you, Asajj has been working for me a *much shorter* time. A double agent. I don't know if that was smart on her part or suicide."

His words sank in, his tone almost lost to her as she struggled with the revelation. Asajj had been the person she'd trusted the most — aside from Max — in her organization. Asajj had planned, schemed and toiled with her, beside her, for months to kill Vader. Except lately, the Adept had been as reclusive as when Padmé and she had first joined forces. Asajj distancing herself from Padmé because she'd known the cost of her continued apprenticeship was Padmé's surrender?

And, in that moment, Padmé was blindsided by the truth — a truth she should have seen from the beginning but had discounted because she'd *trusted* Asajj. The Force Adept's strange behavior the last several months, the sudden arrival and departures for missions and her sudden and intimate knowledge of Imperial targets. Feeling sick to her stomach, Padmé turned away, unable to watch Vader gloat over a naiveté she'd thought to have long ago outgrown.

"That explains it." The words slipped out, softly echoing the renewed pain of a betrayal she should have seen coming from a mile away — all the warning signs had been there.

Vader leaned his hip against the island and watched the realization dawn on Padmé's features as he idly tapped one finger against the solid counter top. Her brow furrowed as she sought to make sense of it, to rationalize it, and though she'd turned away, he could still watch her profile. The silence that fell with her whispered words — whatever she'd said it wasn't important — was damming in of itself. Padmé's horror at having been so thoroughly duped was obvious.

"It must be difficult knowing someone you trusted turned on you."

Turning with a glare, Padmé pinned him with a hateful look, her confusion disappearing under the force of her anger. The demand that left her lips impressed him almost as much as the spirit with which she said it. "How'd you do it? How'd you get Asajj to work for you? She *hates* you; she wants you *dead*!"

A wicked gleam appeared in his eyes — a gleam she didn't entirely understand. "I'm well aware of that. She's made it clear to me on more than one occasion." The slight shrug of his shoulders was almost disgustingly nonchalant. "It was easy. I told her to work for me — help me find *you* — and the *Jedi Hunter*, or she'd be begging for death by the time I was through with her. Her life obviously means something to her."

Padmé's head jerked as if she'd been slapped and when she spoke, she was certain Vader could hear her teeth grinding together "*And mine doesn't!* She's been waiting all this time for the right moment to turn me over to you."

"I wouldn't quite say that."

"That's exactly what you just said," Padmé's glare turned icy.

"On the contrary. It wasn't until this past month that she told me she was working with you and why. I think she had every intention of keeping that bit of information from me and keeping my search for you ongoing until I'd had enough and killed her." Vader left his perch and stepped towards her, the honesty of his gaze pinning her in place. 'I think she would have kept this little "secret" of hers if she hadn't found out you're the Jedi Hunter. She never would have 'turned you over to me' as you put it. You were your own undoing, Padmé."

"*I was doing fine.*" Spinning away, she stepped away from him and his sickening display of honesty.

Vader had no reason to lie to her and her own senses collaborated with his words to scream that it was nothing but the truth. Her own common sense told her he was right, it was why Asajj had never been allowed to know about the rescue operations she planned for the Jedi.

Asajj wouldn't — couldn't — have condoned their continued existence even if it was a way to get under Vader's skin.

Still... until Asajj had learned of it, she'd tried to protect her from Vader. The Force Adept had led him away, kept her safe and directed her out of his path, knowingly in a way to keep Padmé oblivious to his nearness — and the danger he'd presented. Asajj could very easily have blown her cover on that last mission — but she hadn't. Why? It was within the timeframe where she would have known Padmé was the Jedi Hunter.

Vader simply watched her pace as she moved towards the viewport and around the room without seeing it. Her turmoil was obvious as she questioned the very foundation of a relationship as strange as it was twisted. Asajj would have eventually betrayed her, he knew — but she didn't seem to think it would have been possible. Shattering her idealistic views of his apprentice was turning out to be more enjoyable than he'd anticipated.

Padmé continued to reel with the information, unconscious pacing about the room as she struggled with the information that Vader had presented her with. Asajj working for Vader — it seemed... impossible. If he'd never found her, if he'd never recruited her as a double agent, Asajj wouldn't have found out about her clandestine activities. She would have been able to keep the Force Adept in the dark until she'd brought her around to accepting the continued existence of the Jedi was worth the grievance it would cause Vader.

If Asajj hadn't discovered her role as the Jedi Hunter, would she have turned Padmé over to Vader or would she, as Vader suggested, have continued delighting in knowing she was thwarting him at every turn by keeping him away from her? Padmé didn't know — and likely never would — as Asajj's choice had been made. Yet, something still nagged at her. Turning back towards Vader, she moved closer to ask for yet another piece in the puzzle that was Asajj's treachery.

"Where did you find her? How?"

Vader's smile turned nasty, his eyes gleaming with the memory. "JZ7. My Master had Imperial spies track her there. She was trying to destroy the mining operation. But then I'm sure you know that."

JZ7. Padmé remembered it well — not because of Asajj's failure to destroy the mining operation, but because of the injury she'd returned with and her evasive answers as to how she'd obtained it. It had marked the resurgence of Asajj's "old friend" — who was undoubtedly Vader — and the beginning of Asajj's strange behavior. Days, followed by weeks and then months of evasive, suspicious behavior; all because it had been Vader.

Behavior that, in retrospect, could be seen as a form of protection... in its own warped sort of way. In some ways, Asajj's reluctance to reveal the identity of her "old friend" made perfect sense. If Padmé hadn't known Asajj was in contact with Vader, and Vader hadn't known she was working with Padmé, it placed Asajj as a balance point. Knowing both sides, knowing the intelligence of each operation had allowed Asajj to counsel her better than she'd ever known possible. It had given Asajj power, and more importantly, it revealed that Asajj hadn't betrayed her at all in the beginning. Asajj had controlled her fate from the moment she'd begun working for Vader... and Padmé herself had blown it, handing the Force Adept the excuse she'd needed to tip that balance.

Shaky legs carried her to the nearby sofa, collapsing as she sat heavily upon it. Bracing her elbows on her knees, she cradled her head in her hands, struggling to come to terms with everything she'd learned in the last twenty four hours. Everything Asajj had revealed and everything Vader had willingly supplied. It made her head spin, unaware of the slightly dejected pose she cast as she sought some kind of absolution and finding none.

Asajj's betrayal had been inevitable from the moment she'd discovered Padmé was the Jedi Hunter.

Sitting there, knowing Vader stood nearby and watched her struggle, gave her no room to think. It was like being under a microscope — like the room was pressing down on her, threatening to suffocate her with its oppressive nature. Despite that, she stared ahead without really seeing the floor under her feet and instead seeing and *hearing* everything Asajj had said or done since JZ7 — with the knowledge she had now, it made a terrifying kind of sense.

Booted feet entered her view followed by a pair of muscular thighs as long legs bent to kneel, one knee on the ground, in front of her. But it was his voice, smoothly deliberate but faintly mocking, which brought her head up. "I thought you of all people would have known better than to team up with Asajj."

There was an amused sparkle in his blue eyes and she glared daggers at him. Damn him for finding this so amusing. "She has the same goals I do. Why not team up if it meant your destruction?"

Padmé wasn't prepared for the small, amused half-smile that crossed his lips — the one she carried close to her heart. It was that smile she often saw in her dreams — a smile *Anakin* had always saved just for her. To see it on Vader's lips, with those familiar blue eyes watching her so intently, was like being in the throes of his Force grip once again. The image wasn't spoiled by his semi-teasing reply — *Anakin* had loved to tease her while using that smile — but by the words he chose to use.

"It's your own fault she betrayed you. And I would have thought that, after everything that happened with her," he tapped the scar by his eye, "you would have stayed away from her."

"How dare you."

"You're my wife." His mild reprimand held an undercurrent she didn't understand. "Whom you spend your time with reflects on me."

Padmé surged to her feet, nearly knocking Vader over as she did and forcing him to move hastily back or end up sprawled on the carpet. Pushing past him, she took two deliberate steps away before rounding on him once more. Her hands clenched into fists at her sides, her whole frame shaking from the force of her anger. "You presume to dictate what company I should keep when *your* choice companions are thieves and murderers?"

Rising to his feet, Vader regarded her with a feigned tolerance, his eyes glittering with repressed amusement. "I'm sure *your* organization is full of grandmothers and saints. Which category does Asajj fall under, hmm? I can hardly see her as the motherly type considering her actions during the war."

Stung, she lashed back. "What happened during the war doesn't matter anymore to you than it does to me. You were a different person then; a *Jedi*, remember? It was your duty to

protect the Republic and Asajj was on the other side. Now you're just the Emperor's enforcer and while Asajj still sees you as an enemy, so do I. Why not team up with someone who knows firsthand what it's like to fight you and try and kill you? Then you had to go and ruin everything by forcing her to become your apprentice!"

Vader laughed lightly and shook his head at her irate logic. "You ruined it for yourself, Padmé. I had nothing to do with it."

"Don't stand there and tell me—"

The door hissed open, cutting off whatever she'd been about to say and drawing her attention from her captor. A droid she didn't recognize shuffled inside pushing a covered hover cart and the smell of whatever was under the dish made Padmé's mouth water. A quick look beyond the droid to the open doorway revealed what she feared; Vader had set a watch and Stormtroopers wearing *Anakin's* old colors flanked the door. A disgruntled look crossed her features as she mentally revised her plans for a quick escape. Vader, damn him, knew she would try and was making it a task more difficult than anticipated.

Vader's smile was easy as he headed towards the droid and followed it into the kitchenette. "Ah, good, breakfast. I was wondering how long before our food arrived." He looked back at Padmé and cocked his head at her, noting that she was taking in the details of the guards just as she was examining him and the droid. His wife missed little. "Come eat; I'm sure you're hungry."

"I'll eat later. There's no way in hell I'm sitting down and sharing a meal with you."

Amusement and anger warred within him as he stared at the determined set of her jaw; it was a look he remembered well and one he'd seen many a time on the HoloNet broadcasts during the war. Stalking towards her menacingly, he hoped to intimidate her into cooperating, but she stood her ground, glaring at him with such animosity his own expression darkened. Towering above her in a show of male dominance he spoke softly and succinctly so not to be misunderstood. "You will sit down and eat with me. You are my wife. Your place is here, by my side."

Padmé's glare turned as haughty and regal as he'd ever seen her as she drew herself up and dared to challenge him. "Make me."

Their gazes locked, blue warring with brown for a charged moment before Vader lost his patience. Grabbing her upper arm in a vice like grip, he spun her around and dragged her towards the kitchenette. Padmé attempted to dodge the high-handed action, but Vader was too quick. Struggling against his hold, she pried at his fingers with her free hand, her nails leaving small red marks on the back of his hand. His fingers dug into her bicep and pain lanced into her shoulder, radiating outwards as her arm was jerked none to gently forward.

"Stop it!" She leveled him with an accusatory look. "You're hurting me!"

Unexpectedly, Vader released her immediately, causing her to stumble. Regaining her balance she was pushed immediately off of it once more by the implacable man behind her as he shoved her the last two steps into the kitchenette. "Go."

He made no apology, nor did he try to explain his actions as she checked her forward momentum. Padmé rubbed her upper arm as she straightened, glancing back to find that

Vader now stood in the doorway. His gaze was on her face as he braced his feet apart and crossed his arms over his chest. His mechanical hand — once again gloved in the black sheath he wore continuously — tapped a beat with the index finger against his opposite elbow.

Glaring at him, she squared her shoulders and tilted her chin stubbornly.

“Sit down.”

The order in his mild tone was unmistakable and Padmé was disinclined to listen to it. Instead, she turned, finding the droid was still busy at the island where Vader had been standing when they’d begun this discussion, serving up the food it had brought. The table settings were widely placed — too far and too un-even for a droid to have put them down. That’s what Vader had been doing — setting the table. Refusing to feel touched by the gesture when he was being so high handed, she turned her attention instead to the food.

The delicious aromas wafting from the plates made her stomach rumble and growl, reminding her it had been a long time since breakfast the previous morning. A lifetime. As she watched, the droid finished dishing up two plates and then placed the remnants on the table, the bowls sitting between the plates. Shuffling away, the droid took itself, the cart and the empty food dishes away.

Padmé still didn’t sit, and she didn’t look at him, her gaze riveted to the feast that was supposed to be their breakfast — if she deigned to eat with him.

Vader, as if sensing her thoughts, informed her flatly. “Sit down. You are going to eat with me and that’s final.”

Acquiescing to his order, she moved towards the island and the taller of the two stools, irritably noting Vader would still be between her and the door. Sliding it back, she was finally forced to turn and face him and issued a quantifier for her cooperation. “Fine. But don’t talk to me. There’s nothing more I have to say to you.”

The triumphant gleam in Vader’s eyes went unnoticed and he smiled and inclined his head, waiting for her to sit. “If that’s what you want.”

“What I want is to be off of this ship and as far away from you as possible.” ‘And,’ she added silently, ‘with Max.’

Her words dimmed his smile, but instead of reacting to her as she’d expected, Vader stepped further into the room and placed his hands on the island counter top, flattening them with deliberate moves as he leaned towards her. If she’d harbored any illusions as to being allowed her freedom, his firm, carefully annunciated answer would have quashed it. “That’s not happening.” Like lightning, his tone turned teasing and just a bit cocky. “And I thought you said there was nothing more you had to say to me?”

Unwilling to rise to the bait, Padmé shot him a murderous look before turning her attention to the food on her plate. Not waiting for Vader to join her and ignoring the arrogantly amused expression on his face, she lifted her fork and dug in.

The tense silence between them remained unbroken by all but the sounds of cutlery on dishware and Padmé tapping the finger nails of her left hand on the surface of the island. Using those as distractions, her gaze remained covertly glued to the entry way as she searched

for a way to dash out and away from Vader — for a way to find her freedom — at the earliest possible moment.

“You know if you try and leave I’ll be able to stop you.” His mild assessment of the situation drew her gaze back to him. “Just enjoy your breakfast.”

He was enjoying this, damn him. Vader was *enjoying* having her at his mercy and lording over her. He was *nothing* like her husband and for that she was grateful. Vader had no compunction about using the Force on her — as he’d demonstrated — and would be able to stop her before she’d gotten out of her seat. Seething in silence, she ignored the dark presence across the table from her and turned her attention back to her plate, her mind going over everything she’d learned about Asajj once more.

Asajj was Vader’s apprentice.

The thought was mind boggling and disheartening. Any thought she might have entertained at enlisting the Force Adept’s help to escape finally died, washed away by reality. Asajj had betrayed her, but only after discovering Padmé’s betrayal — her lies by omission. Vader was right; she’d brought this on herself for not trusting Asajj with the truth. On her own, behind enemy lines and captured by the very man whose death she actively sought, Padmé acknowledged that the outlook for escape seemed grim.

But she couldn’t and wouldn’t give up. Not yet. While Vader’s prisoner she was unable to search for her children and that was all the reason she needed.

Month Twenty Three, Day 31 PEF, noon

Chapter 21

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Three, Day Thirty One PEF

Vader left shortly after breakfast to check in on Asajj and the operation they'd implemented, leaving Padmé once again to her own devices — and with the knowledge he'd imparted before breakfast.

Asajj had betrayed her, sold her out, all because Padmé had been enabling Jedi to escape Vader's 'justice'.

Leaving the dishes where they'd been dropped, Padmé left the kitchenette and walked straight to the door. The lock was in place, the red lights glowing on the display panel to show that the lock had been engaged from the opposite side, leaving her few options unless she wanted to try a few of Max's tricks.

Vader hadn't said how long he'd be gone and Padmé silently hoped he would be gone for most of the day. His presence was unsettling and made her nervous, reminding her of everything that had been, everything that currently was — and everything she'd lost because of it. Fortunately, or not so fortunately, the reality of Asajj's betrayal was the foremost thing on her mind.

Asajj.

Padmé well remembered when she'd first heard of the Force Adept. She remembered when Anakin had come back to her sporting that scar over his eye and just how distraught she'd been at how close he'd come to losing his life. Squashing that memory ruthlessly, she turned her thoughts to more recent developments.

How she'd met Asajj — the unlikely team they'd made, how they'd slowly come to trust one another over the months that had followed, united by their hatred for Vader and the goal of his demise. The disappointment and anger Asajj had displayed when she'd first failed to kill Vader, followed by the resigned, haughty scorn each successive time. Asajj had known after she'd failed to take that first shot Padmé had been incapable of killing Vader. They'd quarreled, Padmé blaming her blaster, and Asajj blaming Padmé's inability to separate who Vader had been with what he'd become.

She'd never believed Asajj to be right.

Not once.

Not even when she'd continuously failed to pull the trigger.

Settling onto the sofa that had temporarily become her bed, Padmé assumed the pose she'd unconsciously taken earlier when speaking with Vader. Bracing her elbows on her knees, she

cupped her head in her hands, using the posture to block out her surroundings as she considered Asajj's betrayal and tried to do so from the Force Adept's point of view.

Asajj had been right to doubt Padmé's inability to kill Vader, she acknowledged silently. Until she'd arrived on the *Exactor*, she'd never come close to being able to pull the trigger. Only here, in his clutches as she'd felt the adrenaline surging through her system with the knowledge that once he had her there would be no escape, had she found the strength to pull the trigger — and a lightsaber on him.

It had been foolish to attack him with Asajj's blade, but she hadn't been thinking clearly when the betrayal had been revealed. Vader had dared to call her the one thing she swore she never could be to him — wife — and in that instant every grievance she'd had against him had blossomed into blinding fury. Fury that had driven her to not attack him once, but twice.

Twice.

Lifting her head, she stared at the viewport in silent disbelief, horror and pride warring within her at the knowledge. She could have killed him, had *tried* to kill him.

She'd pulled the trigger.

After ten times of successive failures, she'd finally pulled the trigger and *proved* she was capable of doing so — and not just on the firing range. Bile rose in her throat as the vivid image of a blaster bolt slamming into the handsome features she knew so intimately blossomed in her mind. Swallowing, she banished the image, struggling to do the same with the conflicting emotions it had unleashed. She was proud have having finally been able to pull the trigger, but appalled too. The very thought that *she* would be the one to kill him sent shivers of anticipation and dread along her spine.

Tramping ruthlessly down on the softer side of the emotions that were suddenly running amok within her, she focused instead on the adrenaline rush and the pure determination that had driven her to pull the lightsaber from Asajj's belt and then the trigger of her holdout blaster. Narrowing her recollection to that and that alone, she inhaled deeply and buried the fluttering of indecision that had cost her so much in the past.

She'd pulled the trigger once and she could — and would — do it again. It was just a matter of finding the means and the opportunity.

Later that afternoon

Vader's return to their quarters was preceded by the same droid as before pushing a hover cart ahead of it. Only, this time, it was accompanied by a Stormtrooper and Vader had paused outside the door to speak with the other who stood guard.

Padmé recognized her opportunity in a blink of an eye, pushing away the disbelief that something had finally gone her way in this forsaken place and acted. The droid moved past her, the trooper standing just beyond it — and she lunged.

Using a technique Asajj had taught her, she drove her elbow into the exposed wrist as she swept him off his feet. Adrenaline coursed through her system, pushing her through the

moves even as she felt the trooper's armor dig into her skin and pinch as it flexed. Using her weight she drove him into the wall and snatched the blaster from his hands.

Rolling to her feet, she whirled on Vader — to find herself being watched. Leveling the blaster on him, she lifted it to her shoulder and pressed her cheek against the cool metal. The troopers around Vader started to lift their blasters — but he held up one hand, an obvious signal for them to halt. His inscrutable expression remained calmly on hers, his blue eyes shuttered completely.

Adrenaline sharpened her focus and her finger depressed the trigger fractionally even as that penetrating look sent a shiver of unease down her spine. It was almost like he was *daring* her to do it. Like he wanted her to pull the trigger.

"Are you intending to do something with that, Padmé?" His mild, conversational tone was almost pleasant but it made her eyes narrow, sighting in on his chest. "Or are you simply enjoying the view?"

"You're looking at your executioner, Vader." Padmé's words were hard, her grip on the blaster steady even as her brain shouted at her to simply pull the trigger, not to enter a discourse with him. "I refuse to live the rest of my life as a prisoner to anyone, especially you!"

"Shall I make it easier for you?"

"You're an easy target; I can't miss from this range."

Vader waved the troopers back when they made to step into the room further, the weaponless Trooper regaining his feet and shaking his injured wrist. Padmé's elbow throbbed and stung where it had contacted his flesh and armor — but she didn't feel it. Not yet. When the rush wore off she'd be sore, but she'd think about that later. Here and now she had the opportunity she'd always hoped to get but never dared to dream was possible. Vader stood before her, his hands loosely at his side and well away from his weapons. She could strike and he wouldn't be able to stop her.

"Was there something else, wife, or were you intending to keep me in suspense?"

"Are you so eager to die?" The trigger depressed a touch more as her fingers tightened under a flare of anger. "I wouldn't be in your place."

"Indeed."

"Then move aside."

"You must know I have no intention of doing so. Strike, if you will," something glittered in his gaze. "You haven't the stomach for such cold blooded murder."

"You'd be surprised at what I can do," the trigger refused to depress further, her finger locked in place but going no further. "I refuse to remain your prisoner a moment longer."

Vader crossed his arms over his chest, the fingers of his right hand tapping a steady staccato beat against the opposite elbow. "If your freedom means my death, by all means; take it — if you can."

"Of course I can!" Padmé snapped the words at him as she readjusted her aim. "I swear it."

“You swear it, wife? On what, your honor — have you any honor left on which to swear?”

“How dare you question my honor when you sacrificed yours so easily — I will not be kept like chattel, at your beck and call and living only to serve your whim. I’ll see you dead first.”

“If you were going to pull the trigger, you’d have done it by now, Padmé. Your shot is clear, without encumbrance or obstruction. You were a crack shot when I saw you last, as you said — at this range you couldn’t possibly miss.”

Vader’s unnerving gaze never wavered, and beneath that hard stare, she faltered. Her heart skipped a beat and her hands began to sweat as the adrenaline began to fade — and Vader did nothing. He made no aggressive moves towards her as he had the last time they’d fought in his quarters; made no moves of any kind that could be considered threatening in any way.

“The only way you *would* miss is if you chose to.”

Shaking now, the muzzle of the blaster wavered from its target as she struggled to keep it level. Her hand began to spasm, her knuckles turning white with the force of her grip as she struggled to pull the trigger, viciously ordering herself to do it, to take this chance and end it once and for all.

Sweat broke out on her brow as she fought with her conscience. Could she do it? Could she kill him in cold blood, the same way he’d murdered hundreds of innocents? If she killed him, would she be able to stop there or would his death truly be the end of it? When she found her children, how could she hold them, face them, knowing that the blood of the man who had once been their father was on her hands?

Could she really kill the man she’d once loved?

Padmé’s shoulders slumped fractionally as the conflicting thoughts ricocheted through her head. The desire to make him pay was great — but at what cost?

Ice blue eyes noted the fractional change in her posture. Unfolding his arms, Vader waved the troopers back to the doorway and stepped with confident strides to stand in front of Padmé, the barrel pressing against his chest over his heart. He waited until her gaze lifted to meet his before wrapping his hand around the muzzle. “I knew you couldn’t.”

Dropping the weapon as if it burned her — he was closer than she was comfortable with — Padmé tore her gaze from his, her jaw tightening in self-reproach.

Vader, taking her silence for acquiescence, let his hand holding the blaster drop to his side. She stiffened impossibly straighter as he took a half step and bent his neck to her ear. “You don’t have it in you to kill me.”

Clenching her hands into fists, she struggled against everything that had happened, could have happened — and the wasted opportunity. His smug self assurance and certainty as to her actions stung her and *almost* made her wish for the blaster back in her grasp.

Almost.

She didn’t know if she’d have the nerve to use it if she were to get her hands on it once again. Turning from her tormentor — the way his breath feathered across her cheek was *not* helping her inner equilibrium — she made a hasty escape to the lounge where she’d slept the

previous night. And a retreat it was; Padmé was honest enough with herself to realize she was running.

The Trooper Padmé had downed made to detain her as she swept past, not having retired to the entrance of the Dark Lord's quarters with the rest of his squad, only to halt with a cut command.

"Let her go." Vader handed the blaster to the Trooper without looking at him and waved him away. "Leave us — all of you."

Not waiting to see if his orders had been followed — they were *always* followed — Vader kept his gaze on his wife. The sound of the door securing registered somewhere on the edge of his consciousness as did a faint whirring coming from the kitchenette. Reluctantly tearing his gaze from whence his wife had disappeared, he found the service droid setting the table as programmed. Shaking his head, he knew the droid would leave when its function was completed; he turned his attention back to Padmé and considered his options now that the confrontation was over.

Padmé, his Padmé, had tried to kill him again. Her other attempts on his life didn't bother him as much as this one had. Before he'd known about them only fleetingly — a report given by an underling that carried nothing but facts. No, this time he'd been able to look into her eyes, to *see* what was in those brown depths as she lined him up in her sights.

If they hadn't begun to talk, Padmé would likely have killed him within seconds; but after that initial moment, he'd known she couldn't. It had been in her eyes, no matter what she wanted to believe. Padmé wasn't a killer — she never had been — but the fact she'd *tried* sat uneasily on his shoulders.

This wasn't the Padmé he remembered.

This stranger wearing his wife's face had tried to kill him three times now. Twice before he could try to understand — she'd been shocked with his reappearance and reacted — but just now? This had taken planning and determination, with Padmé truly believing in the chance of success or she never would have embarked upon it.

Did she truly hate him that much? All he'd ever wanted for them was a place to call their own; somewhere they didn't have to hide their love or their relationship. He'd done everything for her. He'd become knighted, one of the youngest Padawans ever to achieve that honor in so short a time to ensure he didn't need watching. Once he'd been knighted, he'd risked the wrath of the Jedi council in cultivating their seemingly innocent relationship to reap the rewards of their marriage. He'd chanced discovery, expulsion even exile just to see her.

And he'd destroyed the Republic for her.

Yet, despite his actions, all actions he believed proclaimed his feelings for her more eloquently than any words he could have — and did — speak, her own actions spoke to him. She refused him, denounced him and accused him of atrocities when his only thoughts had been of her. *For* her. She'd tried to kill him several times and not just here on his ship, pronouncing her hatred for him with every venomous word that dripped from her lips.

Of course, she hadn't yet been able to pull the trigger. That alone indicated that she wasn't as certain of her feelings for him as she seemed — at least, reason led him to that conclusion. If she truly hated him and wanted him dead, he had no doubt he would be so; Sith or not, Padmé would have found a way. Her specialized rifle he'd heard so much about was testament to that... of course she would have fired it if she really hated him.

A part of him was still reeling from the shock of the last day — in finding not the warm and much beloved wife he'd expected, but the spiteful creature bristling with ire. Beneath there, somewhere, had to be the Padmé he remembered. Despite being certain of it, he still didn't know how to bring out the woman he loved.

How could he reach her without making an already tense situation worse?

In the viewing lounge, Padmé braced her hands on the ledge by the viewport and stared out into the vastness of space without really seeing it. Angry tears burned behind her eyes, but she refused to cry. Shame swept through her system, anger on its tail along with a confusing mixture of relief and despair.

The emotional upheaval was playing havoc with a system already overburdened by a lack of sleep and imprisonment. For that's what this was and she couldn't bring herself to kill her jailer to buy her freedom. For a woman who'd faced down a hoard of battle droids, fought a Nexu, faced the trials of the galactic senate on a daily basis, hidden her marriage from the Jedi and outsmarted Vader and his Emperor for months it was a sobering feeling. Never before had she been incapable of doing what was necessary — never before had she failed in a task she'd set herself.

Vader had changed all that.

He'd stolen her freedom through betrayal and treachery and expected her to surrender her dignity as well. Closing her eyes she pressed her forehead against the panel of the view port, calling to mind Max's image as she struggled to contain her emotions. Except it didn't help.

Max's image was easy enough to conjure — but along with it came the longing for the security of her quarters on board their mobile base. The yearning for Max's reassuring touch, his unfettered and undemanding presence. He wanted nothing more than she was willing to give; nothing more than she expected of him.

Here, stuck in Vader's quarters, the Dark Lord wanted everything from her. He pushed for her surrender — her acquiescence — and he continued to push. Just over a day in his company and she wondered how far he could push her before she snapped. Before she said or did something that would endanger all she held dear and all her hard work came to naught.

Focusing beyond the viewport, Padmé saw — really saw — the vastness of space as it stretched before her, seeming to go on forever as she struggled with the first tendrils of true despair. Somewhere among those stars was her rag-tag band of rebels with Max at the helm. They'd be worried about her, no doubt searching for her, even as they floundered for some kind of purpose now that she wasn't there to direct them.

She held no illusions about her organization. The people within it needed a purpose and a plan; without her there to provide them that, and steady pay, they would begin to drift apart.

Vader's capture of her wouldn't only destroy her peace of mind, but everything she'd worked hard to build since she'd awoken from her coma. In stealing her freedom, he'd sentenced those people to lives of uncertainty and fear as to if she would surrender their identities.

Nothing Vader could do would make her, she swore silently. Vader wanted her; he had her now. He had no reason to search for people who were no longer a threat now that she was out of the picture. Except maybe Max. Her heart clenched at the thought; Max would worry about her — he always did — and he'd likely come looking for her. The fact they were lovers wasn't what would compel him; it was that he was her friend. A true, honest and loyal friend — and in following her he would meet his doom.

Somehow she would have to reach him before he started searching and became so enmeshed in her past his life would be forfeit.

Somewhere beyond that viewport was a fledgling Alliance, composed of Senators and dissidents who couldn't abide the Emperor's curtailing of their freedoms. For a brief — very brief — moment, Padmé wished she were in their company, playing the games of politics once more in an effort to secure the freedoms that had been stripped from the populace.

It spoke highly of her frame of mind if she was wishing for the company of the people who'd stolen her children.

Even as she thought it, her mind shied away from the pain of that reality. Trapped with a man she couldn't abide, held prisoner by the very monster she'd vowed to destroy and besieged by his blatant appeal, he'd unknowingly stolen the one thing from her she couldn't bear to lose.

A chance to find them.

Everything, *everything* she wanted was beyond the confines of her decadent prison. Everything she needed lay beyond that viewport somewhere — but it was not hers for the asking or for the taking any longer. A chill swept through her as she pulled back from the viewport and wrapped her arms about herself, unconsciously rubbing her upper arms in an effort to ward off the dread of her new reality that was only now beginning to sink into her mind.

The awareness of her situation pressed down on her chest, inhibiting her ability to breathe easy and it was only through a force of will that she pushed it back, tramping it down mercilessly as it threatened to overwhelm her. She couldn't — wouldn't give into the desolation and isolation of her new found circumstances. To give into it, to allow it to take the firm hold it sought, was a dangerous path and not one she could consider walking while Vader's prisoner.

If he knew how she truly felt or why, he'd use it against her.

A noise behind her drew her attention and she focused on the viewport itself instead of beyond it. Vader had entered the room, carrying something she couldn't make out and bent to place it on the table. Ignoring him, she silently bade him leave — except he didn't. He seemed inclined to stand and watch her as he straightened.

Feeling those compelling eyes urging her to turn, she stiffened her spine and glared at him through the viewport. Surprisingly, Vader shifted his gaze, meeting her in the reflective

surface, but didn't speak. Unnerved by his silence — she'd thought for sure he'd come to throw her actions in her face — she spoke without thinking.

"Did you come to gloat?"

"No," his answer was gentle, reminiscent of the Anakin she remembered and it made her heart ache as she turned her gaze back to the stars. "I brought you something to eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"You will be... eventually."

An uncomfortable silence descended between them as Vader watched his wife, her proud and stubborn profile reminding him much of when he'd tried to woo her. Even back then she'd had a spine of durasteel and nerves to match. Despite all the hardships they'd been through — including their tempestuous courtship and secret marriage — he'd never once felt her give into despair.

Yet, as Padmé stood at the viewport with her arms wrapped around herself, there was no doubting what he could feel radiating from her. It wasn't just the despair that ate at him, it was the pain, the raw *anguish* of her emotions that compelled him to move. He'd taken one step towards her before she broke the silence

"Leave me alone... Please, just leave me alone."

Halting his advance but one step closer to her, Vader stared at the line of her back. She'd shifted to present her back to him completely rather than her profile and something in her tone warned him to be cautious. Not because she would attack him — she hadn't the stomach for killing him — but with her in general. Something about her posture bespoke of isolation, a feeling he remembered all too well, and one he knew couldn't be banished by gestures or words.

Complying with her wishes, he turned to go, pausing as he reached the wall which connected to the kitchenette to look back at her. He senses he had her undivided attention at that moment — and used it. "You can't avoid me forever."

"I know." The bitterness in her words was biting. "I don't have any choice in the matter."

Staying where he was, Vader considered her words for a moment, half turning back to get a better look at her. Even as he watched, her shoulders hunched forward — as if to protect herself from him — and Padmé folded in on herself as she braced trembling hands against the view port ledge. Shaking his head, Vader turned away and headed for the door; he would leave her in peace for the moment, but when he returned, he would get his answer for her behavior.

One way or another.

Month Twenty Three, Day 31 PEF, evening

Author's Note: so it hasn't passed my notice that not everyone is reading the tags at the beginning of the story/sections which state what day it is.

Please keep in mind as you read, that a post doesn't equal one day... one post, is — usually — a part of a day, the day being broken down into two or three posts...

Padmé at this point is only in her second day with Vader, so there's plenty of time for the Children to pop up in the conversations. It'll happen, Padmé's just rather focused on escape right now ;)

Thanks for reading guys — it's update day!

Chapter 22

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Three, Day Thirty One PEF

Late evening

Padmé wasn't ready to face Vader when he returned — she didn't think she ever *would* be ready to face him — but neither was she ready for his bold, arrogant question. Despite that, she should have expected it.

“Are you ready for bed, wife?”

“I am not sleeping with you,” the words were without inflection, completely void of emotion, but somehow managed to sound defiant.

“Come now Padmé, I know the sofa is comfortable but you can't really expect me to leave you shivering and alone, curled in the corner.”

“I don't care what you expect.”

The sound of his tread on the floor was quieter, muffled by the carpet and warned Padmé he likely no longer wore his boots. A bare forearm came into view, followed by the golden glitter of his mechanical one as they bracketed hers where they rested on the sill, his hands resting bare millimeters away from her own. The heat of his body was scalding as Vader stepped into her back, his lips at her ear.

“I think you care... very much.”

The familiar touch, the warmth of his skin and the scent that permeated her dreams and left her wanting — all of it contrived to entice her, to wear her down. All of it a ploy to win his way back into her bed. Stiffening fractionally, Padmé made to respond — except Vader's tone

dropped intimately, weaving its way through her system with its dark, alluring pull and rendering her momentarily immobile.

“Do you remember, my love? Do you remember how it was between us — the passion and urgency? How you would beg me to complete you, how you would ambush me on the very streets of Coruscant simply to steal a kiss?” His thumb whispered over the sensitive flesh at her wrist, dragging back and upwards in a ghostly remembrance of similar caresses. ‘Do you recall our lack of decorum, the unseemly haste and urgency of our first couplings after a long absence? Wild.’ Lips feathered across the nape of her neck, making her shiver. “Passionate. *Glorious*. Do you remember how it was?”

Images assaulted her for a brief moment — sensations she’d buried in all but her dreams and the shiver that wracked her frame was one of longing. The urge to feel the complete and total abandon that his embrace had once offered; to lose herself in the oblivion of his touch was tempting, so tempting it made her physically ache.

But it was Vader’s unfortunate choice of words that brought her back to the reality of the present — and the knowledge of what he was trying to do made her furious. Turning, she struck him in the gut with her elbow to drive him away. He took a step back, watching her with faint amusement and seeming totally aware of just how *close* she’d come to giving in simply because he’d thought to use seduction

Until her captivity, Padmé hadn’t believed Vader could hold any kind of appeal for her, but the man before her with his sleep shorts riding low on his hips, was too much like the husband she remembered. He looked too similar, smiled and regarded her in the same way a good deal of the time — he even spoke to her like Anakin sometimes... and it made her yearn for what had been.

And the monster seemed set on using that against her.

His state of dishabille unnerved her as much tonight as it had the previous one — and blast him, he knew it! The knowledge was there in his gaze as he watched her struggle with her temper and with control.

“I told you not to touch me,” glaring at him, the words were as much an accusation as a statement of fact. “Are you so enamored with one metallic hand, you would like another?”

“You cannot kill me, so you would maim me?” His amusement seemed to grow. “You’ve not the stomach for such petty tortures, Padmé.”

“Unlike you.”

Vader arched his eyebrows, but didn’t deny it — nor did he confirm it; he didn’t have to. His cruelty and mercilessness were already well known throughout the galaxy. The only fortunate thing was that Vader’s victims normally ended up dead and not mutilated.

“I won’t sleep with you.”

“You seem so certain of that.”

Padmé’s expression hardened as she forced herself to keep her eyes on his face. That body of his was too distracting by half. “And you seem to think you’re irresistible. I assure you that is *not* the case.”

“You’re tempted.”

Vader stepped close to her again and Padmé reflexively placed her hand up to stop him — only to have her palm slide against his warm, defined muscles as he pressed closer. Her elbow bent, almost of its own violation, allowing him into her personal space even as her hand slid upwards against his skin. The pounding of his heart was clear through the sensitized flesh of her palm and it took a moment before Padmé realized what he was doing — again.

Snatching her hand away as if burned, she backed away from him, rubbing the offending appendage to dismiss the lingering feeling which seemed to have been imprinted. “Tempted or not, I refuse to be your wife.”

“You don’t have a choice in the matter.”

“That contract was between Anakin Skywalker and I. You may wear his face, use his voice — even look at me with his eyes — but you’re *not him!*” Padmé’s eyes blazed righteous fire. “I will not sleep with a man who is not my husband — especially one that looks like him!”

Vader closed the distance between them once more, this time catching her chin in his finger tips. His eyes glittered dangerously as they clashed with hers. “One day soon you will come to me, Padmé. I am the only person left to you in the galaxy, the only one who cares what happens to you. I alone can give you everything you need and desire. Have a care lest your shrewish attitude dampen my favor.”

With a jerk of her head, she wrenched her chin free of his grip. “I never asked for your *favor* and I don’t want it. It will be a cold day in all nine planes of the Corellian hells before I ask *you* for anything!”

Vader’s expression tightened. “Have a care, wife; you may one day push me too far.”

“You mean like I did on Mustafar?”

Whatever reaction Padmé had been expecting for that accusation, it wasn’t what she got. Vader stiffened and a flash of remembered pain whisked across his features for a heartbeat.

Sensing that she had the upper hand for the moment, Padmé pressed her advantage. “Like that, *Lord Vader*? Where you judged me without listening as you once swore you always would? Where you decided that I had betrayed you without so much as the courtesy of an audience? Where you damned me simply because your old Master chose to stow away on board my ship?”

“I made my choice with the information I had,” but there was a tightness to his voice, a tension that hadn’t been there before.

“Oh, I’m sure you did — just like you made your choice to choke me — me! — the woman you once swore to protect and claimed you loved.”

“I did love you, damn you,” he bit out harshly. “I loved you so much I sacrificed my soul to ensure you would live — and you’re so blinded by hatred you can’t see it.”

“You didn’t sacrifice anything for me.” Her words were like nails, driving beneath his skin to strike at the source of the matter. “You *chose* to slaughter innocents!”

"I chose to do what was necessary to ensure a future that would include you. The nightmare of your death had to be averted and there was nothing the Republic could do to ensure it. Only my Master had that ability."

"So you turned on the very people who'd befriended you — nurtured you, *trained* you — knowing that they believed you to be their last hope all because of what? Fear?" She laughed derisively. "So much for the great Hero With No Fear!"

He stared at her for a long minute, seeming to see her — really see her — for the first time. Finally, when he spoke, there was puzzlement he didn't try to hide. "What happened to you, Padmé?"

"You did."

"I didn't turn you into this... whatever you've become."

"No? Then everything you've done was what — a belated wedding gift? The younglings at the temple — did you intend to present their little broken bodies to me as a testament of your feelings?"

"I did what was necessary to ensure my Master ruled as is his right. I did what was *required* of me to ensure that *you* wouldn't die. I agreed to become his apprentice on the condition that he give me the strength and the knowledge to save *you*. Everything I did, everything I've done, all of it was for you!"

Staring at him horrified, Padmé lifted one hand to her throat in shock, the coolness of her fingers pressing tightly against her collar bone. The reality of what he was saying, the knowledge of what could have been avoided if only she'd understood the depth of Anakin's fears — of his distress at the thought of losing her — almost staggered her.

All the innocent lives that had been crushed, the Jedi that had been mercilessly executed... the temple younglings... the worlds that had been razed, whole races enslaved... all because he'd been terrified to lose her and believed her lost. She'd been a catalyst, a focal point for his fears and, in giving into those fears he'd condemned the galaxy to virtual slavery and oppression.

"I don't want it." The words left her lips before she considered the implications of such a denial. "I *never* wanted this and *Anakin* would have known that!"

"All I wanted was to see you safe; the cost didn't matter, no price was too great if you were alive. And, here you are."

"How can you stand there and say that to me? You deliberately eliminated everything I'd worked for, everything I helped create. You've methodically committed genocide on dozens of planets, hunted the Jedi who were my — our — *friends* and executed them without mercy or remorse; you've slaughtered innocent people — how could you even *think* this is what I wanted?"

"It was the price for your continued survival," Vader told her quietly. "And I would do it all again to ensure you stood before me as you do now."

"Then your price was too high," she snapped. "Because if you had believed in me — believed in us — the way you once claimed to, I wouldn't be standing here defying you, but

supporting you as you achieved your Mastery and defeated the Sith instead of joining them!”

“You’d be dead if I hadn’t done what I have to ensure your survival!”

“Believe that all you want if you must to justify your course, but if the Republic had withstood your Master’s push for power, I would be in your bed and not fighting to stay out of it!”

“Sleep on the couch for all I care,” Vader snarled at her softly. “You’ll find precious little comfort in those plush cushions, *my lady*.”

Padmé flinched as he turned away, stalking back to his room and leaving her in peace. Except there was no peace to be found.

Anakin had become Vader because of her and she had no one to blame but herself. If she hadn’t loved him so recklessly, if she’d stuck to her determination to resist him, none of this would have happened. The loveable little boy she’d known on Tatooine wouldn’t have turned into the creature who sought now to possess her, to *own* her because he believed it his right. Anakin would have grown into a formidable man, one that would have tempted her, but only after he’d obtained the control and discipline needed to withstand the trials to come.

Instead he’d succumbed to the pressures, to his fears, and turned his back on everything he proclaimed to believe in — including her. He’d thrown away their dreams and sought instead to extinguish his own nightmares only to become what the Jedi feared most.

What *she* feared most.

Settling herself in the corner of the sofa she’d claimed as her own, Padmé pulled her knees up to her chest and stared out the viewport, an aching, empty feeling somewhere in the vicinity of her heart. Vader had become Vader in his twisted quest to save her life when it hadn’t needed saving. It was her fault and there was nothing, *nothing* she could do to change it.

Returning from her assignment, Asajj landed her fighter on the deck and quickly popped the hatch. Waving off the assistance to descend from the cockpit, she propelled herself from the interior and landed easily, turning only to issue a cut instruction that her ship was to be inspected for damages and prepped for immediate launch.

Vader was certain to have another assignment for her once he heard of her success today.

Fortunately it was near the midnight hour and, unless Vader had need of her skills immediately, she was likely at leisure to rest and recover. Seventeen hours in the cockpit of a fighter left her with a distinctive longing for a shower, something to eat and sleep — in that order.

Striding from the deck, she left the mechanics to do what they were paid for, and headed for her quarters. A brief detour to the mess hall for whatever was left heating for the midnight shift, and she was back, keying in the sequence to unlock her door. It was a small security measure to keep the crew from her quarters but Vader was never stopped by it.

And if she needed more proof, the oblong box that hadn't been on her bed before her mission would have provided it.

Immediately wary, Asajj checked the area around her, her senses stretching out to search for the ambush. No one but Vader could enter her quarters and since Padmé's capture the day before she'd seen little of him. He was, it appeared, running into problems with his errant wife. Part of her was glad — it would keep him occupied and away from her.

Padmé deserved everything she got.

Approaching the box cautiously, Asajj checked the surrounding areas for booby traps, easing her defensive stance a little when she found none. Either Vader continued to wish her presence and put her talents to use, or the box itself was the trap. That in mind, she made a circle of her meager quarters and found nothing to indicate the box was more than it seemed.

Stepping back to the door, Asajj extended one hand towards the case and took a deep breath. Concentrating on the latch — by far the smallest object she'd ever manipulated — she attempted to open it. It took several minutes of intense concentration before she was able to properly grasp the latch in the invisible hand of the Force. Minutes in which Vader's training showed through.

Disciplined now, she focused her anger and fear into that task, using it to heighten and strengthen her grasp on the Force. Slowly the latch trembled and then flipped up, taking the top of the box with it in a sudden move.

Nothing happened.

Approaching cautiously, Asajj peered into the box — and stopped cold. Inside was a pair of lightsaber hilts, the curved handles reminiscent of the blades she'd once wielded for Dooku. The implication of the gift, the symbolism behind it, wasn't lost on her.

Her Master was pleased with her.

Not just pleased, but this was no doubt her reward for bringing him Padmé and the Jedi Hunter all at the same time. A reward that could just have easily been used to seal her fate if she had failed in her task — that possibility wasn't lost on her either.

Stepping forward, now confident she'd have been dead already if Vader wanted it as such, she lifted one hand to trace the outer casing on the lightsaber hilt. They were plain, obviously left that way for her own modifications and adornments. Removing one, she turned it around in her hands, marveling at the detailed workmanship.

Her Master must have made them.

No other Jedi had built as many lightsabers as Anakin Skywalker, and no Sith would be able to create such a simplistically beautiful weapon that could be customized by their wielder. A glance at the base of the hilt revealed what she sought. Eagerly she pulled the other hilt free and checked it too before snapping them together, base to base.

A flick of her finger activated the crimson blades, their glow illuminating her face as she stared at them in awe. The hilts stuck together in a wave formation, acting as a guard as it twirled effortlessly in her hands, the balance perfect. A snap of her wrist separated the blades

and they were as balanced alone as they were together. Not even the blades she'd once wielded for the count had been so fluid, nor had they fit her hands as if built for them.

Sith weapons were tools of destruction, not things of beauty — but these were both. Masterwork weapons.

Humbled and elated by such a gift, Asajj extinguished the blades, her desire for food, a shower and sleep forgotten as she removed her lightsabers from her belt and tossed them into the case. A quick trip to her wardrobe to retrieve the black grips she used on all her lightsabers — her trademark — she got to work.

By morning they would be recognizable as hers.

Month Twenty Four, Day 1 PEF, morning

A little announcement before I post:

The next chapter after this one won't be posted on the 15th — I'll be on Vacation for part of August, so once I'm back, I'll see about putting it up, though it may not be up before the beginning of September. Seeing as how the chapter after this one addresses the topic everyone's been curious about (the twins) I don't feel particularly guilty about making you guys wait — it should be interesting.

Thanks for reading, guys!

—Jade

Chapter 23

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day One PEF

Padmé was in the kitchenette the following morning when she saw Vader next, washing a piece of shuura fruit the droid from the night before had brought into the suite. The basket in the center of the island was artfully arranged and contained several delicacies from her home planet that made her nostalgic — but also brought painful memories.

Anakin sitting across from her while guarding her at the Lake Retreat and using the Force so casually to lift her fruit from her plate. Anakin lifting the pieces of said now cut fruit back to her and allowing her to pluck it from the air with her fork — and his adorably delighted smile when she had. Anakin that night and his confession before the fire.

It was no surprise to her then, when Vader stopped inside the kitchenette doorway and leaned against the doorframe, waiting for her to turn. She ignored him, unable to deal with both the memories and the painful revelations of the night before at the same time. Instead, she continued with her task.

Rubbing the tough skin of the fruit under the trickle of water from the tap, she turned it slowly, ever aware of Vader's gaze on her and just as determined to remain unaffected. Once the fruit was clean, she lifted a cloth from where it hung on the door below the dispenser and rubbed it dry.

Only then did she turn, unable to ignore his presence any longer. Their eyes met before Padmé looked away, sliding into the chair she'd pulled out as she placed the fruit on a plate and took up her utensils. Before she could cut it, it lifted from her plate and drifted across to Vader, who caught it in his outstretched hand.

Examining the fruit, Vader cocked an eyebrow at her and the weight of the meal they'd once shared on Naboo lay between them, Padmé crossing her arms over her chest as she

watched him. Vader didn't leave her in suspense for long as he stepped forward and reached for the table with his opposite hand, his expression inscrutable.

The clatter of something hard hitting the island's surface drew her gaze downwards. Automatically her hand went to the place on her belt, under her shirt, searching for the velveteen pouch normally kept there. Her fingers turned almost frantic as she continued to stare at the evidence before her eyes, unwilling to believe it as they skimmed across her waist band.

It was missing.

Taking a deep breath, she carefully kept her expression neutral as she lifted her gaze back to his. "How did you get that?"

"I found it in a pouch on the floor in the most inconspicuous of places." His grin was smug as he braced his hands on the island top, watching her, the piece of shuura fruit sitting once more on her plate.

Padmé dropped her gaze back to the two piece of japor that had once been the pendant Anakin had made for her. Reaching for it, the need to keep it hidden from his gaze — to keep it from being sullied by his touch — filled her. But Vader was faster, his hand snaking out with lightning speed to whisk them back into his grasp.

"Give those back!"

"After you answer some questions." He instructed her amicably, tossing them a little in his hand so they clinked together, yet giving her no time to agree. "Why do you have it? Especially after you claim to hate me so much."

"I do hate you." Her snide retort was succinct so he wouldn't miss the hatred in her tone. "I have the snippet because *my husband* made it for me. It's the only thing I have left to remind me of him."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Your husband." The mirth died and his expression turned accusing, his glare pointed. "*I am your husband.*"

Padmé returned his glare, tilting her chin at a defiant angle as she shook her head once and snapped her challenge-like retort. "My husband is *Anakin Skywalker*."

"And yet here you are with me and carrying the token *I* made for you all those years ago." His sneering, jeering taunt was issued ruthlessly as he leaned over the island towards her. "Tell me Padmé, has it brought you good fortune lately?"

Stung, incensed by his remarked, Padmé lashed out without thinking, wanting nothing more than to wipe the self satisfaction from his gaze. Her fist balled and her hand came up, swinging in from the side — and Vader caught it, stepping around the island as he did, amusement shining in his eyes. They seemed to ask if she was serious — had she really thought to strike him when he didn't wish it.

"Why is it broken? *Your husband* must be very disappointed to see something he worked so hard on in pieces." His amusement vanished, replaced by something warmer, something *intimate*, as his voice turned husky. "After all, he did make it for the girl he fell in love with the moment she walked into his shop fifteen years ago on Tatooine."

Tearing her arm from his grasp, Padmé regained her feet, and shot back words she knew would hurt; she *wanted* to make him hurt. “I don’t know what my husband thinks; *he’s not here*. And it’s broken because it reminds me of everything I once had and lost. It reminds me of how broken my life has become after you destroyed it.”

“You get some kind of perverse satisfaction out of blaming me for all the woes in your life, don’t you?”

“Who else am I to blame?!” She demanded her hands on her hips as she glared at him. “My life was good — our life was good — until you turned on everything you believed in.”

“I turned on all that was corrupt—”

Cutting him off, she practically screamed her frustration. “*The Empire is corrupt!*”

“If you weren’t my wife I’d have you arrested for treason.”

“Go ahead, if it’ll keep me away from you.”

Laughing, Vader shook his head. “Oh, no, Padmé. You’re not going anywhere.” Tossing the pieces of the snippet up once again, he caught them with a smile. “You see, I don’t believe you hate me. If you did you wouldn’t still be carrying this snippet around.”

“I already told you—”

A wave of Vader’s hand silenced her protest. “Yes, yes, I know.” Looking at her with an unreadable expression he chose his words carefully, deliberately — drawing them out to have their maximum effect. “Tell me, Padmé, do you still *love* your *husband*? Because something tells me you do — despite everything you say.”

Silence was his answer in the seconds that followed and he smirked, knowingly, as he placed the two pieces of japor on the island counter top. Giving her no chance to refute or confirm his charge, he turned on his heel and strode away.

Padmé watched him go, her heart thudding painfully in her chest and echoing in her temples. The sound of his boot heels striking the floor vanished as she heard the door to the suite open and close, leaving her alone once again with her thoughts and the blatant accusation.

Her gaze dropped to the two pieces of japor sitting on the countertop, somehow obscene in their isolation. Scooping them into her hand, she brought it to her chest as tears pricked the back of her eyelids, cradling the broken snippet close to her heart as if she cradled her children. The children she’d never gotten to hold.

The children that would each inherit half of the snippet their father had carved so lovingly for their mother if — when — she found them.

Placing the pieces into one pocket of her leggings, Padmé resumed her seat and reached for the shuura fruit — but her appetite had disappeared. Vader’s parting words continued to ring in her ears, echoing painfully as if searching for a weakness. Pushing the fruit away, Padmé braced her elbows on the counter top and let her head sink into her hands, covering her face with her fingers.

“He’s wrong,” she whispered softly, the words lacking the conviction they’d once held.

Desperate to retrieve it, she reminded herself of all the evil deeds Vader had committed, reviewing his crimes both against her and the Republic she'd so loved and worked so hard to protect. Forced herself to remember that it was because of him and what he'd become that she didn't have her children, that she was missing the most important moments of their young lives.

She would never see them learn to walk, hear them learn to talk; never hear them call her "mom" the way she longed for. She'd never hold them, kiss away their bumps and bruises, watch as they explored the world around them and learned the joys of their existence.

Because of Vader.

She didn't love him, couldn't. She loved who he'd been — Anakin Skywalker. Anakin had held her heart, possessed it so completely she'd struggled on a daily basis with her fears for him while on assignment and loved him with unabashed passion when he was home. Anakin had been her husband and the man she loved — not Vader.

Never Vader.

Vader wasn't Anakin, he wasn't the gentle, tender, passionate man who'd shared her bed and her dreams. No. Vader was a monster interested in only his own fulfillment, in obtaining *his* desires and no one else's. She'd loved Anakin as he'd been and not the man he'd become — and she never would.

Asajj was on the flight deck checking into the damage reports from the wing of fighters when the Force warned her of her Master's presence. Turning, she spied him striding across the deck towards her purposefully. His astromech was nowhere to be seen, so he couldn't have been heading out on a mission — which left only that he'd come for her. Straightening from her pose against the wing of her fighter, she handed the datapad she'd been perusing to the captain of the deck and turned her full attention to Vader.

"Master."

"Your mission was a success?"

A faint smile creased Asajj's lips. "Yes Master. The Jedi was easily routed and I was able to eliminate her and the craft she was in easily. She was no match for the new modifications to my fighter."

"You approve."

"Your droid is very adept," Asajj conceded. The Artoo unit had boosted her ship's efficiency by almost 25% since her return — not an easy task on her ship. "I see why you keep him."

Vader waved away the compliment, his gaze drifting to where her lightsabers hung on her belt. He made no comment on them as he returned his gaze to hers. "I have another assignment for you."

"More Jedi?"

Her eager inquiry made Vader arch his eyebrows. "You may yet meet a Jedi who is more than a match for you, Ventress."

"Unlikely." Her retort was dry. "With you and Kenobi out of the picture, there are none who pose a challenge to me."

"None who would hunt you to the exclusion of all else, you mean."

She shrugged as if to say 'there's a difference?' "Who is my target?"

"You have two targets," he handed over a datarod with the information. "Both are similar to you in build and height and were Knights before the fall; do not underestimate them."

"Yes, Master." Vader crossed his arms over his chest as Asajj tucked the datarod into her belt pouch. "Is there anything else?"

"Included in the information is a coded line for transmissions back to the *Exactor*. I expect reports as often as is safe to do so and will contact you if new information comes in on more targets. I want their lightsabers as proof."

"And you shall have them." She crossed one arm over her chest and half-bowed to him. "I will not fail you in this."

"You had best hope not, for your sake." He turned to go.

"Master?"

"Was there something else?" His echo of her earlier question was disdainful.

"How fairs your wife?"

"It is not your concern," his eyes flashed dangerously. "Unless you have additional information to provide me on her clandestine activities."

"No, nothing."

"No strange absences, no strange sounds from her chambers?"

Asajj arched her eyebrows, not understanding what he was getting at. If he'd learned of Max and Padmé's relationship with him from Padmé, Asajj knew instinctively he wouldn't have been quite so controlled. "Nothing, Master. Is she well?"

"You have brought her to me as instructed, Ventress, your concern for her surprises me."

"Concern?" Asajj regarded him in surprised amusement. "Not concern — never *concern* — I was simply... curious to know if she is how you remember her; if she is the same biddable wife you recall."

Vader's jaw tightened and his hand came up lightning quick. Only Asajj's own reflexes saved her from going down under the strength of Vader's blow. Her head rang and spots exploded in her sight from the force of it — yet she managed to stay on her feet, but barely. Vader's hand gripped the front of her tunic, turning once as he jerked her close to face him.

"Keep your mind on the tasks I set you and off matters that don't concern you."

She staggered as he let her go, gripping the side of her fighter as she did to ensure she didn't fall. Vader's boot heels rang on the plating as he struck them with a vengeance and a small, malicious expression crossed her visage. Padmé was making him irritable which could only mean she wasn't cooperating in the fashion her Master wished. All the more reason to be off the ship when Vader realized that the Padmé he remembered and the Padmé he'd obtained were very different people. Lifting her hand, she wiped at a drop of moisture on her lips and found her hand came away blood stained — and she smiled.

It had been worth it.

Month Twenty Four, Day 1 PEF, noon

Chapter 24

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day One PEF

Late Morning

His mood dark, Vader didn't immediately return to his quarters and the uncertain temperament of his wife. Instead, he headed for his office — which was adjacent to his quarters — and paced back and forth in front of the desk, away from prying eyes.

Ventress had left him with more questions than answers, but there had been no mistaking the unholy gleam in her gaze. She'd known about Padmé's shift in demeanor and — to be fair — she'd tried to warn him, and was now enjoying the effect his wayward wife was having on his equilibrium.

His apprentice, at the very least, appreciated her reward for that capture; she'd been wearing them on the flight deck, one hand absently caressing the hilts as if to reassure herself they were truly on her belt. They'd been modified, as he expected, and now sported the black and purple wrap that was her lightsaber trademark. Fitting, he supposed.

The thought was errant and dismissed just as easily. Ventress had seemed genuinely puzzled by his query about strange noises from his wife's bed chamber — a thought he'd been struggling against since he'd captured her. Seeing Asajj that morning had reminded him of his intention to ask her about a child.

Still, he had to proceed cautiously. Few knew that Padmé had been carrying his child and the fewer who continued to know, the safer his child would remain until he could speak with Padmé about it. Would she tell him if he asked? Would she reveal where she'd hid the child, or would she continue to fight him on the issue?

It had been nagging at him, eating away at his conscience since her arrival, only he hadn't yet found the opportunity to speak with her civilly. No matter what discussion they held, they fought. He'd never fought with her much before this and, to be fair, he'd even told her on Geonosis he'd learned *not* to argue with her — but everything had changed since then.

He didn't want to fight with her about their child, he wanted answers — real answers — to his questions.

Running one hand through his hair in an exasperated gesture of frustration, he considered his options and realized he didn't have many. If he was going to ask her, he'd have to control his temper no matter what she chose to reveal and avoid taking offense at any slight she chose to throw his way.

Would she be more approachable now, after their discussion this morning, or would she continue to claim that she hated him and spurn his questions with disdain?

The uncertainty gnawed at him and Vader was *never* uncertain.

He'd been so sure she *wanted* to be with him and hadn't had cause to believe otherwise. True, she'd ignored his summons, but it had been possible she hadn't received it. Now, with her locked in his — in *their* quarters, he had little cause to doubt her claims; she truly wished to have as little to do with him as possible.

If he could just reach her — reach the woman he'd married that was somewhere under all of that bitterness and hatred — he knew she would come around. The Padmé he'd married was in there somewhere, waiting to be revived and reunited with him; he simply had to figure out how to unlock her. Perhaps their child was the way of doing so — it gave them common ground where there now seemed to be very little and, if nothing else, it was as good a place to start as any.

Padmé left the kitchenette without having her fruit and moved back to her place on the sofa in the viewing lounge, resuming her posture from the previous night as the pieces of japor weighed heavily in her pocket. She pulled them from their resting place, running her thumb over the cracked insignia that was supposed to have brought her good fortune.

Vader's parting words still rang in her ears, but it was the piece of japor that dominated her thoughts. The pieces — and what they signified.

Together they represented a dream and what had been. They represented unity, parts of a whole connected by bonds invisible to the naked eye. Together, they represented what she had wanted her life with Anakin to be — whole, complete; the missing piece to her heart and soul. A dream come true.

As it was now, lying fractured and broken in her palm, it represented something else.

The broken state of her family — her children cast adrift, their father gone. The state of her heart without any of those three elements. The dreams she'd once dared to entertain and now lay scattered at her feet. How the man of her heart had betrayed everything they believed in and shattered those dreams by turning away from her.

Her hand began to tremble and she cradled the pieces in her lap, her knees dropping slightly to accommodate the movement as tears burned in her eyes. The pieces of her husband's innocence — pieces of the past she could give to her children that remained untainted by his darkness.

Closing her eyes, she willed the tears away, unable to help the despair that was once again clawing for release, for acknowledgement. Stuck in Vader's quarters, his virtual prisoner, she had no hope of continuing the search for her babies. There was no way she'd be able to hold them or touch them, no hope — however slim — of seeing them grow. She had no hope of finding them — of ensuring they were given Anakin's legacy.

A sob caught in her throat as she forced herself to breathe, the thickness in her throat making it difficult. She concentrated on the action, refusing to succumb to the overpowering urge to weep.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

Slowly, the tight band around her chest loosened, but it didn't vanish entirely. It never would — not until she was able to hold her children safe in her embrace. It never faded, not during sleep, not during her encounters with Max — not even in the aftermath of her nightmares. The nightmares only served as a reminder that her children had been taken and she'd been powerless to stop it.

If only she hadn't fallen into that coma! If she'd been awake and aware, she'd never have let the Alliance members steal her children, never have let them go without a fight. If she'd been awake... If only she'd been awake!

She didn't open her eyes as she bowed her head against her knees, resting her forehead against them. It was in this position that Vader found her when he returned from whatever errand had been so critical earlier that morning. She heard him enter somewhere in the back of her mind, but she was so focused on the desolation and isolation of her circumstance she didn't react; couldn't have reacted.

The grief was overwhelming as she realized that here, captured by the very man who'd sired her children, her ability to search for them was compromised. Nullified. There was nothing she could do to continue that search and it was as if they'd been taken from her for a second time and — again — she'd been powerless to prevent it.

"Padmé?"

Vader's voice echoed softly somewhere in background noise around her, yet she didn't respond. He called her name a second time, this time closer, and added a question.

"Padmé, where is our child?"

Gone, her mind replied softly, bereft as the word slid through the silence inside with the precision of a stiletto blade.

"I asked you a question." Vader continued to move towards her, his annoyed tone working its way through the mists of her mind and jogging her from it. "Where is our child?"

Not lifting her head, she shook it fractionally, unable to do more as his question ate at the wall surrounding her heart.

"*Padmé!*"

There was no mistaking the commanding tone in his voice or the underlying annoyance in his order having shifted towards anger.

"I don't know." The whisper barely passed her lips, almost lost in the fabric over her knees.

"What?"

Her heart breaking, she repeated the answer louder, the reality of it all, the anguish, carried in her words. "I don't know. I don't know where they are."

“What do you mean you don’t know where they are?” There was concern in Vader’s tone but Padmé barely acknowledged it.

Finally lifting her head, she turned glassy, tear rimmed eyes to him, noting how he stopped in his tracks and stared at her; it was not the expression he’d been expecting. She wasn’t crying, but that hard fought composure was cracking under his simple question.

“I don’t know! When I woke from my coma they were gone. And no one would tell me where they were!”

“They? Padmé, what are you talking about?” Vader was so focused on the whereabouts of his child that he didn’t comprehend the meaning of her words.

Looking away, she turned her gaze to the viewport, but not seeing it. Instead she saw the cold medical facility she’d awoke inside — only to discover that her children were missing and no one would tell her where they’d been taken. Swallowing down the lump in her throat, she forced the explanation between her lips. “Their birth pushed me into the coma. When I woke... Luke and Leia were gone.”

Vader stared at her stunned; his reflection showed the slack jawed surprise she’d never before see on him. Her words had thrown him for a loop, completely blindsiding him and rendering him at a loss for words of his own. Finally, his confusion evident, he repeated her last statement. “...Luke and Leia?”

“I had twins.” Vader’s eyes widened and even in his reflection it was blatantly obvious. Padmé continued, not really seeing it or the effect her story was having, but instead seeing the indistinct faces of her children as she’d given them their names. Faces that had faded over time to a blurry memory and it made her heart lurch painfully. “One of each. The girl you wanted...and a little boy.”

Behind her, elation surged through Vader as her words finally registered, their meaning clear. The rush of emotion was swift and so consuming it was almost physically painful as joy radiated through his being. Twins! Padmé and he were parents to Twins! Unable to contain his excitement, he spoke without thinking — without thought to her current mood. “Twins. Luke and Leia. I can’t believe— Padmé that’s—”

The sad, desolate look on Padmé’s face stopped him as her lips trembled and she blinked back the tears on her lashes. In his excitement he’d moved to her side, wanting to share with her the delight of being a parent. But they were parents without their children and the effect it was having on her was devastating.

His elation waned as the truth of her words finally sank in. “You don’t know where they are.”

Padmé shook her head. “They were taken from me.”

“By whom?”

There was no mistaking the anger in his growled words, or the promise for retribution.

“The Alliance.”

The bitterness in her words spoke volumes more than those simple words — and it gave Vader yet one more reason to hate the traitors. They’d sheltered his wife, helped her birth his

children and had the gall to take them from their mother. This was the unforgiveable sin Asajj spoke of but knew nothing about. The revelation sent a pang of agony through Vader's heart, but he knew it was nothing compared to Padmé's. He could see why she refused to join them. They had betrayed her. No matter her condition at the time, they had no right to take their children!

"The Alliance," Vader said the name with malice in his voice. "They dare to show defiance to the Empire and now I find out they've taken our children?! They'll pay dearly for that." A nearby Nabooian vase shattered, causing Padmé to jump in her seat and look at him in shock. Vader met her gaze grimly, seeking to reassure her, even as he mentally began planning a campaign against the traitors. "I swear to you, Padmé, I'll find the ones who took Luke and Leia; I'll find *them* and bring them home."

Something in the way he said it jarred Padmé, drawing her completely from her grief stricken stupor and back to herself. Vader searching for her children; *finding* her children; *raising* her children. Home? She almost laughed — there was no home for him to bring them to, just a prison cell where their mother was kept at the whim and whimsy of their father.

How could he even *think* to bring her children into such an atmosphere? How could he even think she wanted him anywhere near her precious babies? How could he believe that she wanted them to grow up here, in reach of his influence, in reach of his Master? The thought angered and terrified her all at the same time. Protectiveness swelled inside her, the instincts of a mother protecting her young and her denial came out harshly.

"No!"

"No? What do you mean no?"

Padmé's mental defenses snapped back into place as she rose to her feet to face him, crossing her arms over her chest in defiance. "I don't want you searching for them."

"What?!" He stared at her as if she'd lost her mind. "Why the hell not?"

Tilting her chin at him, she was tempted to rip into him, to vent her suffering and anguish, but the wounds she'd been fighting that morning were still too fresh. The time wasn't right and she was in no shape for this fight. If he said even one cruel thing to her regarding their — *her* — children, she'd break.

"Padmé..." her name was a warning growl on his lips. "You'd best explain yourself."

"I don't want you searching for them."

Her eyes spat fire, but some of her vulnerability must have shown through as Vader did the completely unexpected. His posture eased, the anger seeming to drain away as he looked at her. Reaching out, his finger tips brushed the curve of her cheek and gently caressed the soft skin, making her tremble. To her horror tears flooded her eyes and she tilted her chin that much further to prevent their fall. Vader touch shifted, down to the stubborn line of her jaw.

He stood watching her, saying nothing and finally faintly smiled. "Twins, Padmé... I never dreamed..."

A tumultuous smile answered him, even as if was shadowed with grief. In that moment — with their eyes locked — Vader seemed to melt away and leave Anakin in his place — and

they were in perfect accord. Husband and wife marveling over the miracle that had been their children.

But it couldn't last.

Padmé came back to herself with a jolt and tore her face away, turning her back on him. "I don't want you searching for them."

"Padmé..."

"No!" Her whole body tensed as she wrapped her arms about herself — either to ward off a sudden chill or protect herself from him. "No."

Vader decided to try another tactic — upsetting her about retrieving the twins at this stage wouldn't get him the information he needed to being searching. And search he would, no matter what Padmé wanted. Just looking at her, remembering her desolate posture when he'd entered the lounge had been enough to warn him of the sensitivity of the topic. "When you said the Alliance took Luke and Leia. Exactly what do you mean by that?"

Not turning his way, he watched as Padmé took a deep breath to steady herself before finally answering. "It's none of your business."

"It is my business. I'm their father."

Her fists clenched around her upper arms, the knuckles turning white, her response tight. "No, you're not. *Anakin* is."

"I'm not playing games with you," he told her flatly, deliberately ignoring the jibe. "Tell me what happened. I want to know."

Padmé glanced over to see his face and the vulnerability she'd felt earlier disappeared. Just looking at him — thinking about it and why her babies had been stolen — was enough to make her blood boil. Going on the attack, she railed at him, losing the anger and guilt she'd felt since waking to find her babies gone — and why.

"Fine, I'll tell you. *You* turned to the Dark Side. The 'Hero With No Fear' became a Sith Lord and helped destroy the Republic! The 'Chosen One' turned on the Jedi and slaughtered them! You turned on everything you swore to protect and helped Palpatine build an Empire. Because of that my children were *taken away from me*. I was told it was done to protect them, to keep them safe from you and your Master."

"Safe from me?" Vader said, shocked and affronted by Padmé's words. "I would never harm them. They're my children. The Alliance dares to hide them from me. What fools—"

"Hide them from *you*?!" Padmé retorted harshly. "My children are gone and I had no say in the matter. I didn't even get a chance to hold them! I don't remember what they look like. I saw glimpses of their faces but now it's nothing but a blur. They were taken away without anyone asking me what I wanted. The Alliance didn't care that I wanted them back, that I wanted to raise them. I even offered to go into hiding so I could be with them. I was told no; it was too dangerous. That you might find us."

Her words were pointed barbs that found their mark regardless of if he deserved them or not. The audacity, to think she could hide from *him* — to think she could hide their children from him — made his blood boil. "The Alliance is right about that," he informed her darkly,

leaving no doubt to his sincerity. “I would find you. If it meant tearing apart every star system in the galaxy I’d find you.”

Chills ran down her spine at the implication of Vader’s words. Dreading the answer, she turned her question into an accusation. “That’s what you plan on doing.”

“If it finds Luke and Leia; yes.”

“NO! Don’t you dare!” Her instruction was furious and her eyes blazed righteous fire as she stood up to him, leaving no doubt to her wishes. “I don’t want you looking for them. You have no right. You’ve ruined enough lives, don’t you dare ruin anymore. Luke and Leia don’t deserve to have that on their hands. They’re only babies!”

“What Luke and Leia deserve is to be here with us.”

“What they deserve is their *father*, not this monster he’s become.”

Vader crossed his arms over his chest, smirking. “If you feel the need to call me names, go ahead. You acknowledge me as their father.”

“I acknowledge *Anakin Skywalker* as their father, not *Darth Vader*.”

Shaking his head, Vader chuckled, his good humor restored by her comment — and her inadvertent admission; at least there was no doubt she knew him for who he’d been. “You actually amuse me, Padmé. I’m no more a monster than you are a terrorist.”

“I’m trying to bring freedom to this galaxy. You’re helping enslave it. That’s not the kind of man I want my children to have as a father. I hate the Alliance for taking Luke and Leia away from me and I will *never* forgive them for it. But the *one* good thing that has come out of this is knowing my children are safe from you!”

Unaccountably stung by her sharp accusation, he lashed back angrily, refusing to let her see she’d scored a hit. “I’d never harm my children. I would do everything I could to make sure they are safe.”

“Would you?” Padmé asked pointedly. ‘Would you really be able to? Would you be able to keep them safe from your Master? Who knows what he would do if he found out about them.’ The idea of Palpatine ever having access to her children sent icy cold fingers of fear and dread through her body and she trembled violently at the sensation. “I don’t even want to think about it, the thought terrifies me so much. Would you keep them safe from the Dark Side? Safe from you?” Vader’s eyes narrowed. “I know all about the blood you have on your hands. Do you really think I’m going to let that anywhere near my children?”

“We’ll see what’s allowed near them once they’re found.”

His dark pronouncement was accompanied by a sudden turn as he strode angrily away, heading for the door to their suite. Alarmed and more than a little terrified by it, Padmé raced after him. “What do you mean by that?”

Vader’s long strides continued to eat up the distance between the lounge and the door, but he didn’t answer her. A vein stood out on the side of his neck, indicative of his fury — but he said nothing.

“*What do you mean by that?*” Her demand came off shrill this time. “Tell me!”

The door to their quarters whisked open and Vader strode through, a silent harbinger of death and destruction. Padmé made to follow, but the Stormtrooper guards at the door blocked her way. They too were silent as she stared after Vader, certain her fear showed on her face — only to snap her head back as the door closed in front of it. Placing her hands on the door Padmé stared at it as if she could see through it, his words echoing once more around in her head and filling her with dread.

What could he have meant by that, what could he mean? He didn't think to keep her from the Twins if he did succeed in finding them, did he? Would he truly be so cruel as to keep her children from their mother? She didn't know him anymore, that much was clear, and the thought that he might find the Twins — and keep them away from her — was nigh unbearable.

Yet she was left to wait and to wonder at the import of his words, careening between certainty that he would never be so cruel to a woman he professed to love, and that the monster he'd become wouldn't think twice about it.

Month Twenty Four, Day 1 PEF, evening

Chapter 25

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day One PEF

Evening

Padmé had paced the suite a dozen times around the perimeter, attempted to eat her fruit once more and even tried to leave the space to track down Vader to get him to speak with her — only to be halted by the politely silent Stormtroopers.

They didn't touch her, but neither did they let her go.

In frustration, she stormed back to her seat on the couch and plopped down, dragging her knees to her chest once more only to bounce back to her feet and resume pacing. Vader's parting words echoed over and over in her head, and it took some time before Padmé was forced to admit that she couldn't reasonably predict what he might do, no matter that he was aware of the impact missing her children was having on her.

Her feet chafed in her boots, drawing her attention away — she hadn't yet removed them in all the time she'd been Vader's captive — and it was only when she stopped to take them off, kneeling to do so, that she realized how... ripe she was beginning to smell. Tossing the boots by the door — for the odor was foul indeed — Padmé peevishly hoped the Stormtroopers would be able to smell the stench and retreat.

It was wishful thinking — their masks held air purification devices after all, but it did much to sooth her temper. It was only after she realized her feet and stockings were rank that she bent to sniff her shirt and pulled back in sudden disgust. How Vader kept insisting she sleep with him, she didn't know. He was probably inclined to use some kind of trick to get her into the shower before sliding her between his sheets.

With everything that had happened, she hadn't exactly been concerned about her hygiene... except now that she was painfully aware of it — and her feet raw and smelling from their confinement — the desire to be clean, or at least partially clean, was almost overpowering. A glance at the door told her that her boots were starting to wilt next to it and she smiled grimly. Vader didn't wear a mask like his troops so maybe it would be enough to keep *him* away.

The urge to stay as she was and drive Vader away with disgust warred with the need to be clean, to smell like something that hadn't come from a sewer. Eventually her vanity won out and Padmé headed for the 'fresher. Stepping inside, she checked the lock and quickly programmed it. The *click* of it engaging was all the prompting she needed as Padmé stepped towards the shower.

It had two settings — sonic and water — and she flipped it to the latter. A sonic shower didn't have the kind of power she was looking for, nor the luxury she was suddenly needing to sooth herself. The water blasted on and Padmé carefully adjusted the temperature, finding a folded towel set sitting on the upright cabinet in the corner of the room. Inside the cabinet were two robes — one obviously Vader's — the other was suspiciously her size. She left it where it was. After having checked the suite for everything of use since her capture — all but Vader's chambers — she knew it was the only other item of clothing that might remotely fit her. Moving the towel to the sink, she moved Vader's towel from the nearby hangers to the cabinet and then stepped — completely clothed — into the shower.

She didn't have another set of clothing, wouldn't have until she was able to escape, and she was disinclined to wash them separately. Using copious amounts of soap, Padmé worked up a lather on each of the garments currently exposed to the spray. Only when the front was clean did she remove them.

Her jacket had been discarded almost immediately upon entering Vader's suite — it was too hot within to need it — and so her shirt came off first, vigorously scrubbed and then wrung out before being flung over the rail holding the door to the shower closed. Her pants, socks and under things soon followed, leaving her naked under the spray.

Adjusting the temperature, Padmé worked her hair free of the knot in which it had been kept, gritting her teeth as she was forced to delve into the tangles with just her fingers. A brush was out of the question, as was a comb, so she made do as she had since leaving the Alliance base where she'd awoken. She'd made do with worse and, if need be, she'd simply chop it off above the tangle as she had before.

Patience won out in the end, eventually leaving her hair hanging down about her shoulders and down to the middle of her back. Soaping it three times before she no longer felt gritty, she took the same care with her body, scrubbing until it tingled, imagining that she was erasing Vader's touch, his kiss, from her skin.

Shutting off the water once she found herself to be suitably clean, she stepped free, using the towel to slick the water from her body. The delicious feeling of being *clean* was only soured by the thought that Vader would believe she'd done it for him. Pushing the thought away, she contemplated the towel in her hand. She could either wrap herself in it or her hair — and the last thing she wanted was to be was naked if Vader chose to confront her in the 'fresher.

Reluctantly, she pulled the robe from the cabinet — and nearly thrust it back as her fingers were enveloped in the soft fabric. She hadn't had to touch it to know the robe was her size — the tag had been clearly visible — but now she was suspicious. Why would Vader have a robe her size in his 'fresher armoire? Still, it was wear it or cool quickly as her wet hair lay across bare shoulders.

And she really didn't want to be caught in just a towel anymore than she wanted to be caught in the buff. Reluctantly she eased into the robe, trying to ignore the soft fabric as it conformed to her shape and cocooned her in softness. Rolling the sleeves up, Padmé moved back to the shower and began squeezing her clothing out, twisting them this way and that to ensure the water drained as quickly as possible and they'd dry before Vader's return.

She was in the middle of squeezing out her socks and under things when a sound outside the small 'fresher drew her attention. The shuffling of feet. A frown crossed her face — she had no inclination to speak with Vader — and not dressed in a robe of all things — at that particular moment. Since her capture, he'd been nothing if not difficult.

Hanging the last of her things to dry, Padmé set her back to the door and waited, listening abstractedly to the noise in the next room. It was the voices that were off, the bits and pieces of conversations that caught her ear which finally focused her attention. Pressing her ear to the door, she strained to hear; it didn't sound like Vader.

“—ure, sir?”

A murmur she couldn't understand. Pressing her ear closer to it, she caught the next response.

“Here? Why not in there?”

Another murmured reply, this one sharper and, finally, she identified the source. Clones. More specifically, Clone Stormtroopers; they all sounded alike. Her lips flattening in a thin line, Padmé turned from the door and shed the soft robe, leaving it in a pile in the corner as she gathered her clothing. Slipping into the still damp articles, she towed off her hair before leaving it loose about her shoulders — but still in tangles — and stepped from the 'fresher.

What she found wasn't what she was expecting to see. Three troopers were inside the room, placing a box a piece on the ground by the sofa she'd claimed as her bed. Even as she watched, a fourth and fifth trooper entered from the still-guarded door, carrying yet more boxes. One, obviously their commander by the insignia rank badge on his shoulder, was directing the whole thing.

“What's going on here?”

The troopers stopped for a moment, glancing her way, before resuming their work. The pile was already a half dozen boxes high, all of them large, and Padmé couldn't begin to fathom what was in them. The three troopers left, to return with another armload, these boxes slightly smaller than the last as their commander turned to her.

“Packages for you, milady.”

Padmé crossed her arms over her chest, pinning him with a frosty glare. “From *whom*, Trooper?”

The trooper seemed unfazed. “Lord Vader.”

“And what,” she demanded, storming over to the pile of boxes to slap her hand down on the stack, “may I ask is in them?”

“Clothing, of course.”

Rage suffused her system as the last of the packages was brought in and the troopers made to withdraw. “Take them away; I don't want anything he's chosen for me!”

The trooper bowed low but shook his head. “I am under orders to do no such thing, milady, wear them in good health.”

As the door slid shut behind the Troopers, the click of the lock didn't register as Padmé rounded on the boxes in cold fury. How dare he?! How dare he be so presumptuous as to dictate what kind of clothing she should wear, or he thought she should wear. Kicking out blindly, she toppled the stack, sending them skidding across the floor. One box broke open, revealing a lacy, confectionary of a dress reminiscent of what she'd worn during her time as the Queen of Naboo.

Her ire redoubled as she looked into a second box, tearing open a third and ripping into a fourth. Huge gowns, every single one. Fabric flew as she tossed gown after gown over her shoulder, the wrappings they'd been in tearing under her onslaught. Each one of those dresses was something she'd left behind in her past, representing a time when she'd been the sworn protector of her people's freedoms and powerless to choose her own wardrobe.

Never — not for Anakin and certainly not for Vader — would she ever be caught in one again.

Seething, Padmé turned back to the pile and glared at it, wishing the giver of those obscenely decadent and over priced pieces of fabric were standing before her so she could strangle him with silks. Her rage solidified in the pit of her stomach, the last straw after Vader had taken advantage of her emotionally overwrought state earlier, and an icy calm settled over her like a mantle.

Pushing to her feet, she marched straight into the kitchenette and to the knife block on the counter. She pulled two blades — one serrated, the other a vibro — from the block. A quick glance and she replaced the vibro knife. It would be much more satisfying to *feel* the fruit of her labor as that gauzy material was rendered under the knife.

Striding purposefully back into the main room, she returned to the lounge and picked up the first creation — a pink and white frothy thing that looked like a sundae — and set the knife edge to the fabric at the bodice.

Deliberate slashes and a firm tug parted the fabric as the dress was torn neatly in half. Unwilling to risk that Vader would simply have the garment re-sewn despite her show of displeasure, Padmé set about methodically destroying the gown, making the pieces no bigger than the width and length of her arms. When she was finished, she moved without pause to the next, and then the next, working her way through the pile of offensive things that dared to be called clothing. The material was left to fall where it would, forcing her to move to different areas around the suite as she made piles of rendered fabric.

It took almost an hour for Padmé to decimate the pile of gowns, and Vader didn't return once. He would be furious with her, she knew, upon his arrival, but that little detail didn't matter.

She was furious herself and this way Vader wouldn't just hear it, he'd see it.

Jabbing the knife into the top of the table where a pile of the fabric had fallen, she turned away and took up her posture at the viewport, her hands braced on the ledge before it, every line of her body announcing her displeasure.

How dare he *presume* to tell her how she could dress!

Padmé didn't have to wait overly long for Vader to reappear once she resumed her vigil at the viewport. In fact, not ten minutes passed before Vader's return — and his mood was immediately obvious.

"What the— *Padmé!*"

The roar was muffled only by the slight dividing wall where it angled towards the kitchenette. Padmé's knuckles turned white where she gripped the ledge, her lips losing all their color as she pressed them down in a firm line. He was back — good.

"Padmé!" Vader fairly snapped her name. "What is the meaning of this?"

Eyes flashing fire, she rounded on him in time to see his eyes narrow as he observed the knife protruding from the small pile of the center of his low table. The symbolism wasn't lost on Vader. They slowly lifted to meet hers, embers of true anger making his eyes glitter — and she didn't care. The presumptuous, egotistical man had it coming and *she* was just the one to deliver this lesson.

"Ex—"

"How dare you?" She spat the words, cutting him off. "I am not chattel to be garbed as you wish or summoned to your beck and call. I refused to be bought by inane gestures with nothing but selfish gain behind them. I am *not* a trophy to be displayed, paraded around like some kind of doll and dressed for court simply because you wish it. I *refuse* to play dutiful, loyal and loving wife to a monster — and one who doesn't have the intelligence to understand that I will never, *ever* wear anything like that again!"

"Your *place* is at my side," Vader returned evenly, his rage crackling about him in a nimbus of unseen power. "You're my wife and you will dress the part or-."

"Or what?" Padmé advanced on him, slamming her finger into his chest in her ire as she made her point. The muscles didn't give, resisting the assault. "You'll force me to wear them? Dress me up while sedated? I'm not some designer doll to be dressed up and paraded around. I'd rather walk around nude than be seen in one of those awful creations again!"

"That can be arranged!"

"Then do it — your crew will love the show."

Her challenge made his nostril's flare, and his eyes darken with the image she presented, but jealousy would prevent him from taking her up on such a challenge. Padmé knew it well. *Anakin* had never wanted to share her unless necessary — Vader displayed that possessiveness but to an increased degree that bordered on obsession. There was no way he'd leave her without clothes when the alternative was a show for his crew that was supposed to only be for his viewing pleasure.

Vader, however, wasn't about to admit that she had him, even in this small of a battle, and glared at her heatedly. "There will be nothing to see," there was no room for argument in his tone. Leaving it at that, he turned on his heel and marched away, anger and fury written in every line of his posture.

Padmé watched him depart with a smug smile on her face, a little disappointed when Vader didn't kick at the piles of fabric he passed, simply walked through them as if they weren't

there before exiting the suite once again.

Several minutes passed before Padmé followed in his wake, taking the same route to the door and knocking politely on it. It took three knocks before the trooper on the other side of the door opened it. “Yes, milady?”

Padmé leaned one shoulder against the door jamb, ensuring the trooper could look beyond her into the mess the suite had become and ensuring the dress boxes were plainly visible. She wished, in that moment, she could have seen the expression under the impersonal white helmet. “I need a cleaning droid,” she informed him, her tone slightly smug. “There’s been a bit of an... incident.”

The Trooper was silent for long minute, his fellow guard looking in from the other side of the door as Padmé waited for his response. She accommodated them, obligingly stepping to the side to offer a view of the fabric littered room.

“Will that be a problem, trooper?”

“No ma’am,” snapping to attention, Padmé realized he’d all but forgotten her in his observation of the room. A pity; if she’d been able to see his face, it would have been a good opportunity to escape. “We’ll have the droid sent down immediately. Was there anything else?”

“Dinner would be nice.”

“Right away, milady.”

The door closed as Padmé stepped back, bursting into laughter for the first time since she’d been captured — for the first time in a long time. Real, straight from the gut laughter that made her stomach ache and her eyes tear up. The Trooper’s reaction could only have been better if he’d had his helmet off. Shaking her head, she headed for the kitchenette.

When the droid arrived she was going to have it leave the knife and its captives embedded in the low table in the lounge but clean up everything else. It would do well to serve as a reminder to Vader that she wasn’t simply going to sit back and accept whatever he decreed as law.

Entering the small kitchenette, Padmé reached for the shuura fruit she’d neglected to eat the day before, buffed it against her now clean and dry shirt, and retrieved a small knife from the block. Paring the fruit, she dropped the skins into the trash unit before using the knife to remove slices and eat. With both knife and fruit in hand, Padmé moved back into the lounge area, surveying her handiwork as she absently cut and ate slices of the fruit.

Fabric was everywhere and she acknowledged that perhaps she’d gone a trifle overboard — but her point had been made. Vader wouldn’t make the second mistake twice. Her smile faded as she chewed on a slice of the shuura fruit. Vader *never* made the same mistake twice — but would he heed what she’d said or would he make her beg before offering such a gesture again?

Leaning against the back of the sofa, she eyed the fabrics critically. She shouldn’t have sliced them quite so finely; if she’d saved panels, she might have been able to cobble together something different to wear for the next time she washed her clothes.

Shaking away the thought, she looked up as the droid she'd asked for entered the lounge and the sound of dinnerware rattled in the kitchenette; both droid appeared to have come together. Giving her instructions to the cleaning bot to tend to everything *except* the embedded fabric and knife in the table, Padmé headed back for the kitchenette and the supper she'd ordered.

It would be the first time she'd eaten without Vader's presence to taint her appetite since her capture and she intended to enjoy the experience; she doubted it would happen often.

Month Twenty Four, Day 2 PEF

Chapter 26

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Two PEF

Padmé woke late the following morning to find herself alone — if he'd been back the night before at all — and a peek into his bedchambers did nothing more than confirm the emptiness of the space. It also revealed that there was significantly less distance between the sofa she'd been using as a bed and the doorway to Vader's room.

Setting her lips, she glared at it.

She'd suspected it was being moved after she went to sleep at night, but it had never been this close — of that she was certain. In fact, the sofa was well beyond the boundaries of the lounge in the center of the living area, the rest of the furniture moved ever slightly to hide its shift.

Another of Vader's ploy's to try and get her to cooperate, no doubt. The furniture was heavy — as she found out when she attempted to drag it back. Sweating profusely, she pushed, pulled, grunted and swore as she fought to move it back into position. All to no avail as it remained stubbornly adherent to the floor.

Leaving it, she silently swore she would sleep on the floor rather than on a sofa — it wouldn't be the first time and she doubted it would be the last. Anything was better than being anywhere near *him* while she slept. A little voice in the back of her mind, the treacherous one that craved Anakin's touch, called her a liar and whispered of the remembered pleasures she'd experienced with her husband.

Shoving that little voice back into the nether reaches of her mind where it belonged, she headed for the 'fresher. A quick shower did nothing to ease the tension in her frame or the sensation of walking on egg shells. She felt as if she were simply waiting for Vader to emerge, say something deliberately hurtful, and remind her of her captivity before disappearing again.

He'd rile her temper, non-verbally flaunt the fact she couldn't kill him as she so desperately wished, torment her senses and leave her feeling deflated — and more confused than she'd been in a long time.

The need to escape both him and his ship were pressing, almost as if she could feel her twins slipping away from her with every star system they traversed, with every hyperspace jump they made. It was as if something within her screamed "*You're going the wrong way!*" but refused to give any indicator more direct.

In an effort to distract herself — she considered attempting to pick the lock on the room leading from the lounge but thought better of it with the possibility of Vader's reappearance

more likely now that she was awake — Padmé headed for the kitchenette. She was hungry — the dinner she'd had without Vader having been almost twelve hours before — and saw no reason to deprive herself. That, and she never knew when he'd feed her.

There was a small cooling unit which had revealed several exotic vegetables the night before — enough for a mixed salad of some kind. That in mind, she withdrew a sharp knife from the knife block — this one of the larger variety — and organized what she was going to need by the cutting board. Disdaining the shredder, there was something very soothing about using a knife on the vegetables — she could imagine they had *his* face — as it clicked across the stone counter.

The rhythm was automatic, giving her time to think... something she didn't need more of. The more she thought, the more they turned to her children and her own current predicament. To the man who held her captive with the ferocity she would have shown in defending her children, if she'd but been able to see them. Anger bubbled to the surface as she chopped.

The Alliance had taken her children. Bail and Mon had betrayed her friendship and her trust because of the man who'd sired her children and what he'd become. They'd stolen them, hidden them away so no amount of searching, no amount of questing had yet revealed them. Seething, Padmé dumped her vegetable into the bowl and began on the next one. If any of them showed their faces again she would—

“How very—” a knife slammed into the wall beside the doorframe “-domestic.”

Her hand extended in full throw, Padmé stared at Vader for but a second before she regained her wits, finally registering the fact that the knife she'd thrown had come from the block and she still held the one she'd been using to chop vegetables in her hand. A second revelation was that Vader's tone had been amused — even after the knife had left her finger tips.

Fingers tightening around the haft of the blade still in her hand, it came up defensively in her off hand. She didn't remember transferring it, but she wasn't about to relinquish her weapon. “Go away.”

“Or what, you'll use me for target practice?” Vader lifted one hand and placed a finger against the still wobbling blade. “We've been through this already, you couldn't kill me with a blaster, you're not going to kill me with that knife.”

Padmé kept her gaze on his chest this time, zeroed in on the section where his heart beat behind his breast bone. “Why not?” She twitched the knife in a menacing fashion, “Maybe I just wanted to ensure I felt your life leaving your body, draining away with the last drop of your blood.”

Vader arched his eyebrows — a move she caught from the corner of her eye — and stepped forward, deliberately into the path of the knife as he had with the blaster, taunting her. “Slide it home then.”

Padmé, without looking him in the face, began to do just that, easing the blade in a fraction of an inch. Vader sucked in a sharp breath and his expression went blank. “I don't hear you laughing, Vader,” Padmé taunted in return, feeling slightly dizzy as the tip of the blade pieced his flesh. She could feel the distinction, the difference in the resistance — but there wasn't

much of one. The knife was wickedly sharp and cut through flesh the way it cut through fabric and the ease of it made her stomach roil.

“My wife has me at knife point and is intent on drawing blood — my blood; would you be laughing?”

“You’re good at laughing in the face of adversity. It’s what you do. Laugh, kill, maim and walk away... you *always walk away!*”

Vader flinched, more from the twist of the knife’s tip than the barb in her words, for he’d heard the underlying grief Padmé couldn’t keep from them; grief that had little to do with his actions regarding everyone else and everything to do with her. He could *feel* it — the way it bent and shimmered around her like a shield of anger and pain. It was staggering just how much she felt he’d abandoned her — and now resented him passionately for. Hate was too strong a word when she could barely bring herself to harm him, let alone kill him

“If I wanted to walk away, I would never have spent the time I did searching for you, risking my Master’s displeasure and my life in the bargain.”

“I don’t care what you risked; it means nothing to me. *Nothing!*” She spat the words like a verbal slap. “All I want, all I ever wanted, was my family; my children and — because of you — I may never get them back!”

The knife eased forward a little further, slipping further into the muscle and the drip of blood he’d felt well to the surface became a line as Padmé suddenly seemed capable of doing just as she’d sworn. He was tempted to grab the knife, to wrest the hilt from her grasp, but she’d pierced skin and doing so would be dangerous, even for his Force enhanced reflexes.

Lowering his hands, he deliberately moved them wide around the knife and jerked on the tail ends of his shirt. It had the effect he intended, parting where the knife bit deeply into his skin and tearing downwards, leaving the shirt hanging from his shoulders and exposing the tanned expanse of blood streaked flesh she seemed intent on skewering. Her eyes widened for just half a second, but the grip on the knife never wavered.

“If you’re going to kill me, Padmé,” he told her, his tone deceptively mild and just shy of caressing. ‘Don’t you think you owe it to yourself to look on the face of the man you call your enemy, as you do? To watch your dream of revenge fulfilled, to *see* the completion of a hunt that’s taken you through the galaxy to dog my steps and have me in your sights.’ The soft taunt was masked beautifully by his velvet voice, and Vader deliberately slid home an edge of his own, one he knew would turn things in his favor. “Wouldn’t it be a shame if you had the moment you’ve been dreaming of stolen because you hadn’t the nerve to watch the crowning moment of your quest?”

Padmé’s heated gaze immediately leapt to his, blazing with intent and righteous fury — and froze.

His eyes were liquid blue. Soft, lacking the hard edge that had solidified with his transformation into Vader, they stared back down at her speaking to every warm and loving memory of the man he’d been; the man she still dreamed of. Acceptance of her verdict shone in their depths and she was momentarily blinded by the understanding of her actions, unable to see beyond it to whatever it so carefully concealed.

Vader intended it that way.

The point of the knife wavered, frozen in place as another line of blood, and a little voice in the back of her mind screamed at her to hammer the blade home while she had the chance — even as her heart contracted painfully and her breathing seemed to hitch in her chest.

Warm, gloveless fingers settled over hers where they held the haft, sliding over her skin in an echo of the caress of his words. “If you’re going to do it, Padmé, just end it. Don’t make me suffer the way you have.”

Padmé let out a small mewling sound of distress as she snatched back her hand, spinning away and putting distance between them as her chest heaved and her eyes stung with unshed tears. She couldn’t do it; the sight and smell of his blood seemed to permeate her system and the violent urgency, the *need* to give into the nausea was almost overwhelming.

Gritting her teeth, she stared unseeingly at the wall, struggling with what she’d almost done — and the overwhelming shame that came with the knowledge that she couldn’t and never *would* be able to. It was those eyes, those accursed blue eyes of his. Not the yellow tinted orbs of the monster who haunted her dreams on occasion — the boogeyman who was responsible for her sorrows — but the blue, clear blue orbs of the man she’d given her heart and soul to. It was *always* his eyes that stayed her hand; she should never have looked up.

Behind her Vader tugged the sharp tip free of his skin and examined the blade as drops of his blood splattered on the floor at his feet. Smugly, he stepped towards Padmé, reaching to the side — just beyond her view — to retrieve a cloth and wiped the stain from the blade. She jumped as the blade was placed back on the counter by the vegetable she hadn’t finished cutting, but didn’t look at him.

Leaning in close, Vader placed his lips next to her ear, just shy of touching her, but knowing she’d feel the weight of his words as easily as she’d feel his breath across her cheek. “So much for not loving me.”

Padmé’s fingers whitened where they gripped the counter, tossing her head as she turned to glare at him. “The knife’s too messy — it’d be a shame to stain such a lovely carpet.”

Vader laughed and all the warmth she’d seen in his eyes when the knife had been planted firmly against the wall of his chest disappeared. They were still blue, but there was no warmth left, as if winter had returned after an all too brief summer. He smirked, easily seeing what she didn’t want him to in the depth of her gaze — and confirming what he already knew. Getting *her* to admit it, however, was another challenge all together. “There is no carpet in here.”

Padmé’s gaze was drawn downwards as he chose at that moment to take a corner of the cloth and catch the lines of crimson that streaked his chest, the wound already having eased back to the occasional drop now that the knife was gone. Clenching her jaw against the surge of nausea, coupled with the need to tend to him, she stayed where she was, a silent observer.

Vader reached around her to wet the cloth before continuing to dab at the mess across his bare chest.

The sight of it, bare and injured, was affecting her in ways Padmé was struggling to stem — the urge to take the cloth and clean him up herself surging through her system with

increasing ferocity. Still, she couldn't — wouldn't — give into it and passed it off as a nurturing instinct in overdrive with the absence of her children. It had absolutely *nothing* to do with the fact she itched to touch those muscles again, to feel the flex and play of power under her finger tips. No. She swallowed hard. Not a thing.

"Contrary to appearances," Vader resumed speaking when it became obvious she had no intention of dignifying his comment with a response. It amused him to no end that she was fighting something she'd long ago succumbed to and couldn't seem to see that her eventual surrender was only a matter of time. "I didn't come here to fight with you."

"What, you don't have anything better to do than torment me?" Padmé snapped her gaze back to the cutting board — and the now clean knife sitting beside the forgotten ingredients of her salad. The thought of doing anything with a knife that had been stained by his blood was enough to make her lose whatever appetite she'd had.

"*You* attacked *me*. I have no intention of harming you."

"Your very presence hurts me!" Padmé turned, keeping her grip on the counter. He was too close, casually leaning against the island as he finished mopping the blood from his skin. "If you cared for me at all, you'd let me go!"

"Impossible."

"Only because you make it so."

"Perhaps." His eyes glittered with intent. "Or perhaps I like the idea that my wife is alive and at my side where I can protect her rather than have her be the focus of bounty hunters and assassins."

Unable to watch his hands and the cloth, she kept her gaze on his impassive expression. "Believe what you're doing is noble if you must, but don't expect me to believe it. I'm your prisoner, your captive — spoils of a war that should never have been fought and you should never have been a part of."

"We can't change the past, Padmé."

"But we can learn from it!"

"Is that why you didn't join the Alliance?"

"You know why," her resolve faltered for a moment before she strove ahead. "How could I help the very people who stole the only part of my husband I had left? How could I help them knowing that they were as bad as *you* in their own way?"

Watching her, Vader finally dropped the cloth and crossed his arms across his chest. "I don't understand what happened, Padmé — and I... *want* to understand. When I last saw you, Threepio had taken you back on the cruiser."

"After you Force choked me," there was an accusation in her tone that was unmistakable. "You thought I'd betrayed you by bringing Obi-Wan to Mustafar and didn't give me a chance to explain. You simply *assumed* the worst and in doing so condemned me to this hell!"

Regarding her calmly, he almost smiled. "I can't regret my actions, Padmé — they brought you back to me eventually."

“They might have killed me and my children — children you don’t deserve!” She almost screamed it at him. “Would you have regretted it then, oh *Dark Lord*? If you’d killed me outright, breaking my neck on that platform like you should have, none of us would be in this mess!”

Grabbing her by the shoulders, Vader shook her once — hard enough to snap her teeth together. “I went through my own personal hell thinking I’d done just that and that you were lost to me for good.”

“Your actions ensured it; I may be right in front of you Vader, but I will *never* love you!”

Her words seemed to trigger some kind of switch for he smiled — lazily — and let her go. “Keep telling yourself that, wife. What I don’t understand is what happened after Mustafar. Threepio was supposed to bring you back to Coruscant for care.”

“I don’t know exactly what happened,” Padmé informed him icily, “I was already drifting in and out thanks to your actions. There are flashes, the odd memory, but nothing really clear.”

“You don’t remember who in the Alliance helped you?”

“I wouldn’t tell you if I did.”

Vader conceded the point with a wry twist of his lips. “It’s interesting that you’ll protect them from me after everything they’ve done to you.”

“I don’t agree with their politics or their methods, but if keeping their identities from *you* is the only way to ruin your plans, I’ll take them to my grave.”

“Not,” he told her succinctly, ‘a place you’ll be going any time soon.’ Lifting one hand, Vader made a motion and a slice of the vegetable she’d been chopping drifted to his grasp. He examined it and took a bite, watching her thoughtfully. “You said something yesterday about a coma?”

“What about it?”

“How long were you in it?”

Wary and still stung by the revelation that, no matter how much she wished him dead she couldn’t do it, Padmé searched his features. What she was looking for, she didn’t exactly know. Ridicule, perhaps; accusation. Something that said he blamed her for allowing their children to be taken. She didn’t find it. Instead, she found something completely unexpected. Concern lurked in the chill of his gaze, well hidden and almost buried — but she’d seen that look one too many times when Anakin had dubiously supported one of her missions for the senate.

“I was told six months.”

“Six...”

Vader stared at her in near silent shock. Be it from the fact she’d answered his question, or the duration of her coma, Padmé couldn’t tell. Whatever it was, she felt compelled to explain even as the feeling deserted her hands once and for all. She couldn’t have released the counter

in that moment if she'd wanted; it was the only thing holding her upright — that and her pride.

"So I was told. I was asked to join the Alliance when I woke, as a... payment for medical services rendered. It was only when I kept getting told I needed to be stronger before they'd bring me Luke and Leia that I started to realize something was amiss."

The question on Vader's face was easy to read.

"Two months." Her admission was as strained as the memory. For two months they'd been able to hide the fact the twins weren't anywhere on the hidden base. She'd been naive to believe they'd have kept her children nearby — not when everyone would know whom their father had been. "The first days, when I initially woke from the coma I was disoriented, but they were all I could think about. I kept getting told that they'd let me see them when I was stronger, that I wasn't in any shape... that I..."

"You don't have to explain."

Vader was surprisingly subdued, but Padmé didn't really hear him. Lost in the pain of that memory — in the betrayal of the moment when Bail, one of her supposed closest friends, had informed her oh so gently that the twins had been placed in hiding for their safety and letting her see them was dangerous and ill-advised. Bail had gone so far as to say she would have done the same in their place — and she'd railed on him for it.

"I believed them and they abused my trust, using the time to ensure there was no trail for me to follow, that there was no way to trace what had happened or where they'd gone. They wiped the memory banks of the ships, deleted all of the holo files on the station — everything. All because they *knew* I wouldn't simply sit back and accept the fact my family had been scattered to the four winds."

"And they asked you to join them." It was a statement — an agitated one at that — more than a question. And Vader felt his own ire rise at what the Alliance had done to Padmé.

Her laugh was derisive. "Many times, in many ways. I had only one condition and they refused to meet it. Not because they don't know where Luke and Leia are, but because they didn't believe I could protect them from *you*."

Vader, surprisingly, let the barb pass; but then, Padmé couldn't read his mind and know this was all part of a larger picture. That Vader was gathering information, trying to determine what exactly had happened to her and where. "Did you try and find them?"

"What do you think I've been doing?" Padmé demanded hotly. "Everything, every step, every new system, I scour the databases for any mention of their names."

"What about your parents?"

"No one," she told him succinctly, "would be that naive and my parents would *never* keep my children from me!"

Vader conceded the point — he well remembered the familiar atmosphere in the Naberrie home and Padmé had a point. No matter how ecstatic they would be to have their grandchildren under their roof, they would have found a way to contact Padmé the moment they learned of her recovery.

“And don’t even think about the Lars’ clan. No one in the Alliance would know about them to even consider sending the twins there. It’s too obvious! The Alliance members made it very clear they’re not hidden somewhere I would ever consider looking.”

“It must have rankled you being in their debt.”

“Debt — ha!” Padmé’s fingers flexed — an unconscious move she couldn’t feel — and she tossed her head. “If anyone owes anyone anything, they owe me and so do you.”

“So I do.”

“Then let me go!”

“Never,” Vader shifted forward and his hand — the one without his glove — moved to cup her face. She flinched, but that didn’t stop him from rubbing his thumb over the curve of her cheek. “But I do owe you something.”

“I don’t want *anything* from you.”

His chuckle was laced with arrogance. “You want *several* things from me, wife, but the most pressing is our children returned to you.”

“They’re not yours to search for.” She jerked her head away with a glare. “And the *only* thing I want from *you* is my freedom!”

“So you keep saying,” his hand fell back to his side. “Surely their treatment of you isn’t the only reason you refused to join — the diplomat I married would never have let her personal feelings supersede the necessity of toppling what she perceived as a tyrant.”

“Democracy failed the Republic, allowing it to be manipulated and twisted to the ends of a Tyrant. It’s failed once and they’re idealistically blinded if they believe it can’t and won’t fail a second time. The goal of toppling Palpatine is a noble one, but it won’t change things.”

“So you believe your approach is better.”

“Not better, but more effective. The Alliance is ineffectual and weak, driven by idealists who have no grasp on the reality of the situation.” Her chin tilted up at an obstinate angle. “I’ve also learned that putting other people first only gets you lied to and betrayed.”

“And the Alliance taught you this?”

“No.” Her eyes glittered. “You did.”

After their discussion in the kitchen, Vader had left Padmé to change, taking her completely off guard by neither admitting to or denying her final accusation. The words had sat between them, heavy with meaning neither of them seemed inclined to broach. Once he’d changed, he’d left her once more, and Padmé had resumed making her salad.

She didn’t see what she put into the bowl, only seeing her fingers as she vividly saw in her mind’s eye the knife sliding so effortlessly into Vader’s sculptured skin — Anakin’s skin. Her hands shook every time she recalled how close she’d come, chagrin and shame warring with anger and pain within. Eating without tasting anything, she selected a holo novel from the

shelves in Vader's lounge and propped herself up using the wall by the door she hadn't yet had the nerve to attempt and open.

Hours passed and the novel did little to hold her attention as her mind kept replaying the scene from that morning in the kitchen — that scene, and the memories it had reawakened. Painfully, she thought back to the days Vader was so intent on learning about; to the initial days of her recovery when she'd been too weak to do more than plead to see her children. A holo, a visit — anything; but just see them.

Tears pooled in her eyes, tightening her throat as she tilted her head back against the wall, willing them not to fall. She'd been so very gullible to believe that they would have returned her children and it had taken fourteen months with her own little band before she'd been able to admit that Bail had been right. She would never have allowed herself to keep the children — why would anyone else.

But that didn't make it right. She never got a chance to hold them, to see their little faces and memorize their features so she'd have *something* of them with her. She never got a chance to say goodbye. Now, all she wanted was a chance to say hello, to see her children and hold them now.

Exhaustion was catching up with her. She knew it, could feel the ache and heaviness in her bones. Sleep had been elusive since she'd been captured — the deep kind of sleep her body craved — and she feared succumbing to it. If she didn't, she continued as she was, stretched to the very limits of her control. If she succumbed, there was the possibility of her nightmares returning. Nightmares there was no Max to banish.

Max.

She didn't know what she was going to do if she had another nightmare without him around. She'd come to rely on his calming presence, the way he held her and watched over her while she struggled to pull herself together. That Max had been there when the dreams had begun played some part in it she was sure, but those dreams had been a key reason they now shared the kind of physical relationship they did. They hadn't technically shared a bed, but Threepio had always known to summon the slicer whenever she had one of her dreams. Especially since it was rare she could wake herself, or be woken once she succumbed.

It worried her. If Vader saw her while in the throes of one of her nightmares, would he taunt her — use the information against her the way he was already using his knowledge of the twins to pull out the painful details about her past? Or would he — Force forbid — try and comfort her?

Vader had insisted he wished her back at his side and in his bed. While he wasn't Anakin, his allure was still strong; calling to her on a primal level she both recognized and feared. With her defenses down from the nightmare, she was terrified she might be inclined to let him comfort her, and he would draw every wrong conclusion about why. He wouldn't see how she craved a friendly human touch to banish the nightmare and remind her of reality; he'd see the way she clung to him as a victory.

Which mean she couldn't risk it, wouldn't allow herself to sleep — except she was already exhausted beyond all measure and if she drifted off to nap, there was no guarantee she wouldn't slip into that deeper sleep.

At some point during her musings she did the very thing she feared, her body taking its ease where it could as it slipped into desperately needed slumber. Twenty minute naps or strictly enforced short sleeps were less than she needed and the human body will eventually, when deprived, take what it needs.

Padmé didn't even feel the transition as she slipped from consciousness into unconsciousness... and dreamed

Month Twenty Four, Day 3 PEF, morning

Chapter 27

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Three PEF

No... please... no... don't take them... not my babies... not my babies! No! Please! I-NO!

Vader shook his head to clear it of the disturbing, desperate pleading he'd heard in his chambers last night — and the silent sight that had accompanied it.

He'd returned late to find Padmé sleeping with her back propped on the wall next to his office door, her knees drawn close to her chest and having fallen a little against the one holo novel case. She'd been determined not to sleep anywhere near him and, in the frame of mind he'd been in upon his return; he'd been in no mood for waking her to fight.

Leaving her where she'd fallen, he'd retired and slept deeply when her screaming had drawn him back to consciousness with knife-like precision. He'd lain in his room for a full minute before throwing back the covers and reaching for his shorts.

Dressed, he'd gone looking for her and found a sight that was more disturbing than any he'd seen since having her at his side once more. She'd been as still as a statue. Silent, her eyes wide with tears pouring from them as she sat where he'd left her — but no longer fallen over. Her whole body had been shaking, as if under the effects of a powerful drug, and nothing he'd done had reached her.

He'd tried talking to her, to get her to snap out of whatever gripped her so solidly, except she'd been awake. If she'd been sleeping he would have had an option or two to try, but awake she was not only that, but aware of what was happening around her. When he'd touched her, turning her face towards his she'd flinched — but that had been the extent of her reaction to him. Her brown eyes had been distant and unfocused. There'd been no hint of recognition, no glimmer that she knew he was with her, or knew him at all. The complete desolation in her eyes had been enough to drive him away.

Choosing to stay nearby, he'd watched her for a good portion of the early morning when he should have been sleeping — and she didn't move again. She didn't shift to make herself more comfortable, barely blinked or breathed. If he hadn't been able to sense her and the staggering sense of grief emanating from her still form, he might have thought her dead.

It was an unnerving and heartbreaking sight to see his wife in such a state — and one he hadn't a clue how to alleviate — especially when his memories of her were so vivid; a beautiful young woman so full of life and energy. A direct contrast to what she was now, in that moment. The grief he sensed could only be related to the twins — as he deduced the nightmare to be about by her screams — and it was the one area he didn't know enough about to even attempt a solution.

He was helpless to help her, at a complete loss for what he *could* do and didn't like it one bit. It was too uncomfortably similar to his time with the Jedi whenever something had happened he couldn't control. Too similar to when doubt had plagued him with regards to her continued safety and his caring for her had been carefully concealed in the guise of friendship. He'd been helpless to affect her future because of the confines of his position.

It was almost as unsettling as her continued silence to realize he'd not overcome and conquered those failings upon becoming a Sith as he'd come to believe.

His comm. beeped, the indicator light for the bridge flashing. With a wave of his hand he activated it. "Yes?"

"Lord Vader?"

"What is it Admiral?"

"I'm told there's a priority transmission for you sir."

"Patch it through."

Turning in his chair, he put the image of Padmé to the back of his mind, and exhaled a silent breath of relief when it was only Asajj's face that appeared in the holo transmission and not that of his Master. Even across the galaxy, the man had the uncanny ability to sense things from him through a simple holo. "Priority, Ventress? Really."

"I simply assumed you'd wish the status update the moment I had one." Her smile was like the cocky half smile he normally wore — and it irritated him to no end.

"It's early, and I have much to do; I don't like having my time *wasted*."

The smile, he was gratified to see, disappeared. *"One of two targets has been eliminated and I have a good solid lead on a third. Do you require I return immediately once the second is dispatched?"*

"Knight or Master?"

"Barely a Knight from my understanding." Even the holo image's eyes gleamed with anticipation. *"He should be an easy enough target to eliminate."*

"Bring me proof, Asajj."

She crossed one arm over her chest, a foreign looking lightsaber clutched in one hand. *"Proof you shall have, Master. Ventress out."*

Her image disappeared and Vader sat back in his chair, tapping his fingers together as he stared at the space where she'd been. Asajj was dismissed from his thoughts immediately; she was proving to be a most useful hunter-killer — and Padmé's image immediately replaced it. The Padmé who was still, to his knowledge, sitting quietly with her back to the nearby wall and staring out the viewport in the next room.

There wasn't anything to see, but Vader well knew she wasn't seeing the star lines of hyperspace travel. She was seeing the images that had woken her from a sound sleep, the nightmare of having her children taken — her subconscious tormenting her with images she couldn't possibly know as she's been in a coma at the time.

Or could she?

Coma patients were known to take in the sensory input from their surroundings even if they couldn't respond. It was possible, however unlikely, that Padmé might know more about the twin's whereabouts than she believed. Those nightmares could be her brain's way of telling her there was more to her memories than she believed.

But how to broach the subject?

Living without their children was tearing her apart — Vader could see it, but worse, he could sense it. She put on a strong front, used her rage as a shield and forged ahead in spite of her pain. Now, locked in his quarters, she had nothing to strive towards. Not his destruction, nor the eventual reunion she obviously needed — she didn't have access to any kind of information, none of what she'd already gathered and certainly not his extensive spy network.

Giving her access was out of the question, who knew what she'd do with it. But would it be possible to pull the memories from her mind on the off chance she'd agree to the idea? He doubted he should simply because it was him and everything about him was a reminder of all she'd lost. He couldn't help that — they were his children too! — a fact she conveniently wanted to ignore and one he couldn't let her. Unfortunately, it was the one area they currently had in common, and the only subject they seemed capable of talking about with any kind of civility.

Even talking about her coma had left her agitated and a part of him was certain he'd helped bring on this nightmare with his questions. For the better part of the last two days, Luke and Leia had been the only topic of conversation — well, them and the Alliance's role in their disappearance and Padmé's coma. A change of topic was in order, one that wouldn't trigger this kind of an episode — but what?

Tapping the tips of his fingers together, Vader reviewed the information he'd obtained from his wife in the days since her capture. Today would make it day three and in that timeframe the majority had been spent on the twins, her railing at him about various topics — among them the fact he *wasn't* her husband, which displeased him to no end, and that she wouldn't sleep with him — and being the brunt of two separate attempts on his life.

Attempts on his life.

Vader smiled and his grin was almost sinister. Oh, there were topics they hadn't covered yet and these were sure to snap her out of her melancholy if for no other reason than to stand on her podium and preach to him. His course set, he pushed the matter aside.

For the moment, Padmé would have to wait. As much as he wished to spend time with her, he had a planetary assault to plan, a bombardment to arrange, prisoners to interrogate and various other day to day tasks he couldn't let slide unless he wanted the whole of his armada to know of Padmé's presence. As it was, a select few knew she was on board and he intended to keep it that way; it simply meant he didn't have as much time for her as he would like.

Taking the short detour into his quarters through the door that lead from his office into the lounge, he found Padmé's posture and position unchanged. Kneeling beside her, he examined her features. Pain and desolation were her constant companions — ones she refused to let him ease from her, or alternatively chose to blame him for.

Reaching out, he cupped her face in his hand, earning another flinch for his troubles. His free hand caressed her hair back from her face with a gentle motion and the stern mask of his features eased into concern. He couldn't help her, and his position dictated he couldn't stay with her. Leaning forward, he pressed a heartfelt kiss to her forehead, hoping to convey whatever it was she needed and some form of comfort.

"I have to go, my love," he told her regretfully, watching her face for any sign she understood; any sign that she heard. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Padmé's expression didn't change, didn't so much as flicker as he ran his thumb across her face before letting his hands drop. He shook his head in frustration as he rose to his feet once more and headed back out through his office.

No... please...

Her own voice echoed Padmé's ears, pitiful in its begging as she struggled against the pain of the birthing and the elation that her children were finally arriving. The images of that fateful time were ingrained in fuzzy discordance to the very root of her soul. It was the knowledge of what came next that always turned the memory of her children's birth from joyous to nightmare.

Obi-Wan Kenobi's smiling face, outlined in such stark detail compared to the blurred image of her daughter's visage, as he held the child for her to see. The voice of the medical droids, harsh and grating in the background as they tried to encourage her, to keep her from slipping away.

The fragments of voices she recognized, all speaking in broken sentences about her and her children; discussing their parentage and the fact they were twins.

Bail.

Obi-Wan.

Yoda.

Discussing how to best care for her as she slipped from consciousness, her last conscious memory that of medical droids carrying the twins to another room where they would be cleaned and dried. She hadn't known at the time, but it would be the last time she'd see them.

Nightmarish fragments blurred together with her current reality as she watched in a surreal kind of fog as two faceless infants stretched their arms out to her — and she couldn't reach back. Strapped to the table where she'd birthed them, she was imprisoned, powerless to protect them from the darkness that encroached quickly.

Bail and Mon Mothma appeared, benevolent saviors as Padmé begged them to help her children, for her friends to bring them to her side. For Bail and Mon to free her so she could do the very thing she wished.

No... don't take them...

They did neither.

Instead her friends smiled sad smiles and turned their backs on her, scooping the infants into their arms — and walked away into darkness. The cries of the infants, of her *children* tore at her heart as she struggled against the bonds, shrieking her desperation for freedom into the night.

Not my babies... not my babies! No! Please! I-NO!

Padmé was shaking.

She always shook when she woke alone from the nightmares; an occurrence that had happened only a handful of times since they'd begun. Max's presence had soothed them, drawing her from darkness into his soft acceptance and empathy, the strength in his hold an anchor for her shattered memories — an anchor she now lacked.

Max!

Her mind cried out to him in silent anguish as tears ran in ribbons down her cheeks from lids that wouldn't blink. The need for his comfort was staggering, the absence of his presence like another wound on a soul already shredded. He alone understood what these episodes did to her, the way they fragmented mind, body, heart and soul — he alone *knew* how bad they could get. He alone knew how to bring her out of the trance-like state that accompanied the memories.

Max! Where are you? I need you.

But Max was light years away, as lost to her as her children — as lost as her mind was to memory. He was somewhere beyond the ship that held her captive, as powerless to get to her as she was to get to her children.

At the time of the nightmare she hadn't realized she'd screamed, or that she'd gone from sleep to wakefulness; not even when Vader had touched her. His presence was like a part of her nightmare. Unwelcome and unwanted, a representation of all she'd had and all it had cost her and she'd felt her soul shrink away from that touch even as her heart had rejoiced.

Vader's actions and reactions to hearing that the twins had been taken were similar to her own — so similar, she'd felt a pang of kinship she'd never thought to feel with him. His attempts to reassure her weren't lost to her mind, but they felt as surreal as the rest of the morning had been — fragments of attempts at comfort her body and mind didn't comprehend.

What he couldn't know was the all consuming nature of the nightmare, the way it absorbed her brain and paralyzed her senses, allowing for sensory input only after the fact. Max had been able to bring her out of the trance-like state by learning to catch her before the nightmare progressed too far.

It had been a long time since she'd had the whole thing and the shock of it was numbing even as she shook with the aftermath of her desperation and desolation. The emotional upheaval was physically painful and her inability to move was more due to the fact that her heart felt ready to pound out of her chest and her stomach twisted so far inside itself she thought it might explode from her core.

Lacking Max's comforting and reassuring presence, she hugged herself in his place, trying to remind herself of what it felt to be in his arms, but her mind wasn't capable of such a

memory as it ricocheted from memory to memory, leaving her alone and adrift in the sea of time past.

It wasn't Vader's fault he couldn't reach her; she didn't *want* him to be able to reach her in this hurricane of conflicting emotions.

She remembered looking at him, but not seeing him. Remembered his words, but couldn't remember having heard him speak. Her skin tingled where he touched her, but she didn't recall feeling the weight of his fingers.

The only thing she had truly felt was the pressure of his lips where they had lingered, loving and concerned, on her forehead. The thought was fleeting, as jumbled with the rest of her emotions when she came to him, both a pleasure and pain that he'd attempted to help her.

His words as he left were felt in her bones rather than heard — but the cadence of the way he said he loved her lingered, reverberating through to her core in both a disturbing and enticing fashion. The need to believe she wasn't alone was strong, almost overpowering, and she fought against it simply on principal.

Round and round she careened, her emotions flowing from one end to the other as images of Bail, Mon Mothma, Luke and Leia, Vader, Anakin and Max all collided, the storm within her taking every ounce of her self control to contain in something less than hysterical, screaming grief. As a result, the hours passed unnoticed and Padmé waged war with herself, struggling to lock the nightmare back into the recesses of her mind.

It was well after noon before Padmé reacted once more to anything around her, though she did absently take it in.

Not that there had been much to see or hear. A droid came with her breakfast — an indication that she'd once more be eating without Vader's presence — but she wasn't hungry and likely wouldn't be for a long time. The star lines had faded back into stars, indicating the ship had dropped out of hyperspace, but she had no access to a data port or computer to figure out where they were so it had ceased to matter.

The sound of troopers once again entering the suite was what finally caught and held her attention, drawing her from the well of grief that was threatening to drown her. Attempting to move, Padmé's legs protested, pains shooting through the muscles and pins and needles racing through her feet and hands. She'd been sitting so long in the same position that the movement was protested in the form of loud cracks as her knees straightened.

Gasping, Padmé fought against the physical pain the prolonged position brought, welcomed it as a reminder of her own current status — living — and cursed it all at the same time. Slowly, the roar in her ears receded and her body began to respond once more to her mental commands.

"Think she'll destroy this bunch?"

The query caught her attention as she was able to rise to her feet. Almost mechanical sounding laughter was a response and she moved to the entrance of the lounge. More Storm troopers were parading into the suite, boxes once again in hand. Tightening her grip on the corner of the wall where she clutched it for support, Padmé's lips set in a firm line as she listened to their banter.

“Who knows?” A box was placed by the sofa where it had been left near Vader’s bedchamber. “He’s not sparing any expense regardless.”

“Bah. Even if she does, Lord Vader can certainly afford to eat the cost.”

“Good thing she’s not mine,” one Trooper — the Lieutenant by his colors — stated. “She’d eat through my cheque in a week!”

“Hardly,” Padmé cut in softly, drawing their complete attention. “A day or two at most.”

“Milady!” The Troopers spun at the sound of her voice and snapped to attention. It was almost comical as they had the boxes slid under one arm and their bodies held rigidly.

Padmé pushed away from the wall. “What do you bring me today, Trooper? More gowns of impossible silks, fashions and angles?”

None of them responded, keeping their at attention stances.

“At ease.”

Relaxing, they shared looks no one could read beyond the tilt of their heads. The Lieutenant inclined his head towards her in apology. “We mean no disrespect, milady.”

Waving away his apology, Padmé motioned to the boxes they were bringing in. There were more today — closer to twenty five or thirty, but they looked smaller. “What’s in the boxes?”

“Hopefully something more to you taste in style,” he responded with another tilt of his head. Behind him, the Troopers filed out, having finished their delivery. “Lord Vader’s orders.”

Padmé crossed her arms over her chest. “Well, get out then. I’ll let you know if I need the cleaning droid.”

“I have him on standby in case they don’t meet with your approval.”

Blinking at the Lieutenant, Padmé could swear he was laughing behind his helmet — and enjoying her acts of defiance. If their discussion was anything to go by, she was giving the Troopers fodder for their grapevine. While she didn’t mind humiliating Vader, she had no intention of being the subject of ship or fleet wide gossip.

“Get out.”

A smart salute and a spin on one heel had him doing exactly that, leaving Padmé once again alone in the suite, this time with more boxes, but smaller ones. Glaring at them, her hands on her hips, she found her normal reserve of anger waning. Her lack of sleep and her lack of activity were starting to catch up with her.

Almost hesitantly, Padmé reached for the first box and lifted the flap, half expecting to see more frilly concoctions and the evidence that Vader refused to listen. Instead, she let the lid fall in stupefied disbelief, the content of the box sitting primly amid white packing paper.

Slippers.

Soft looking slippers, like the ones she’d once had at her parent’s house without frills or ornamentation. Beneath the slippers was a pair of boots, sturdy and easily better than what

she now wore on her feet. Placing the box aside, she reached for the lid on the second one, wondering if it was a fluke.

A pair of cargo pants.

A leather jacket.

Pairs of comfortable slacks.

Everything in the boxes to follow was exactly like the first — serviceable, lacking ornamentation and made from sturdy, but comfortable material. Additional shirts, sweaters, pants, slacks, socks, underwear — that made her blush — and a nightgown went with the slippers, boots and jacket. All of them things she would wear. The only items even remotely flashy in any way were the jarring colors for the underwear Vader had chosen, but even those were simply cut. Daring and a touch risqué, but simple.

Well; maybe he'd listened after all.

Folding the clothing away, she organized it into three of the larger boxes, leaving the boots and slippers in their own and folding the jacket over the top them. The boxes she placed in the lounge — what she considered her own personal space — and then had the Troopers called for the droid to clear away the trash.

Chewing on her lip, Padmé considered the gift, her practicality warring with her desire to do everything she could to prick Vader's pride. Destroying the clothing would do that — especially since it would be the second time — but the more rational side of her was telling her not to throw away perfectly good clothes when she didn't know if she'd ever get her own back. Vader had supplied a new wardrobe — everything down to a new wrist chrono — and she was loathe to wear it for that reason alone; but she also knew when not to throw away useful tools.

There was every possibility that Vader wouldn't let her forget that she wore something of his choosing, but if he was going to be petty, so would she. She'd use every opportunity to remind him that she'd refused and destroyed his first offering, only accepting when he'd chosen something that was more suited to her taste and situation.

That brought a faint smile to her lips.

Vader would hate not being able to dress her up and parade her around like the trophy he believed her to be and she was going to enjoy every minute of it. There were precious few joys left to her and thwarting Vader was one of them. Turning her back on the boxes, she resisted the lure they provided — new clothes! — and went to see if she could move the sofa once again. Sleeping upright against the wall wasn't exactly comfortable but she wasn't about to ask Vader to move it back if she didn't have to. Besides, it would give her something to do and a way to expend some of the energy she no longer had an outlet for.

Who knew — maybe if she pushed and pulled long enough, she might even convince herself she didn't find Vader attractive and wasn't tempted into more than anger by his presence. Attempting to move that mountain of a couch was better, in her mind, than any alternative Vader suggested.

Month Twenty Four, Day 3 PEF, evening

Author's Note: a question has arisen as to the *length* of this particular story... In total, Daenarrah and I figured we'd cover no more than six months time total after Padmé is captured.

To give you guys an idea; this is day *three* — meaning Padmé's been a prisoner for 4 days as she was captured on the last day of the previous month.

The first month of her capture will pass almost day by day and as the posts progress, each post will start to represent a day — to get a good idea of the timeline, *please read* the notation at the top of every chapter; it will tell you what day of what month we're in.

We're going by the standard terran calendar: 1 year=12 months

This story, in other words, is a *long* way from finished...

Chapter 28

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Three PEF

Evening

By the time evening rolled around, Padmé hadn't succeeded in moving the behemoth of a couch more than a few inches on either side and she'd come to the conclusion that escaping Vader's chambers, and eventually the ship, were the only goals she could realistically set or hope to accomplish. Killing Vader was no longer an option; he looked, sounded, smelled and even tasted too much like Anakin. There was too much history, too many good memories of who he'd once been she couldn't separate them in her mind. Vader had been Anakin; he still treated her somewhat like Anakin did even if he refused the name he'd once worn.

That was the toughest part.

Anakin was gone, except the villain who now wore his face remembered what he had been and was using that against her. Vader wasn't about to let her go without a fight, but she was a fighter and he just hadn't yet realized that backing her into a corner was not a good way to earn her cooperation. There was nothing he could do, nothing he could say, that would make her *want* to stay with him.

Focusing on the anger and resentment, using that pain as a catalyst, Padmé managed to push the nightmare from that morning out of her mind and took stock of her options once more. She couldn't go out the main door; Vader had guards posted there around the clock to keep her in. Oh, she could ask for just about anything and they'd bring it to her — but she wasn't allowed to leave

If she wasn't allowed to leave, she'd simply have to earn her freedom.

Her attention turned to the door around the corner from the kitchenette — the door where she'd spent a good deal of her morning curled beside and hadn't a clue what was behind it. It was locked with an encoded key pad not unlike the one on the outside of Vader's quarter's main door — except this one looked new. Vader must have had it installed after the fact because it didn't sit quite right against the bulkhead on one corner and the panel was easily popped open with the blade of a kitchen knife.

Finding a datapad in the case of holo novels, she hooked two of the wires from the door controls to it. Switching the power on, she carefully read over the lines of code, looking for something familiar — and finding it. All security systems had to have certain base line programming codes and this one was no different. Max had taught her a few tricks for bypassing minor security features and she was about to put them to the test.

Up on the bridge, a Lieutenant monitoring the internal security features of the *Exactor* suddenly jerked, his attention spinning back to the console he was supposed to be monitoring as a soft blip appeared on the map and began to buzz. Frowning, he called up the internal specs, not recognizing that area of the ship. He'd never seen an alarm from that...

Vader's quarters; more specifically, the internal door from his quarters leading out.

Turning from the screen, he stood, going to the edge of the raised walkway running through the center of the bridge. At one end, by the viewports, Vader stood with two of the higher ranking officers, discussing something the Lieutenant didn't want to consider. He glanced back, confirming that the alarm was still active, before raising his voice towards one of the deck officers nearby.

"Captain?"

"What is it Lieutenant?"

The Lieutenant glanced towards Vader, careful to keep his voice down. "There's an alarm coming from Lord Vader's suite, sir. Should I send a security detail?"

"What kind of alarm?"

Taken aback by the sharp question, the Lieutenant snapped to attention, his military training so ingrained it was automatic. "A keypad tamper alarm, sir!"

"Is something amiss, Captain?"

Both the Captain and the Lieutenant froze at that pleasant question and the Captain turned to salute the Dark Lord of the Sith. "The Lieutenant is reading an alarm from your quarters sir; a keypad tampering alarm. I was about to authorize him to send a security detail."

"I'll deal with this myself. If there are any more alarms from my quarters, contact me immediately."

"Yes sir!"

Leaving the bridge behind, Vader strode through the hallways, heading for the turbo lift that would take him down to the level where his quarters were located — and where his headstrong wife was trying to break into his office.

Focusing on the codes before her eyes, Padmé carefully manipulated the sequences, searching through the database for file information on recent use. The punch code, however, was more sophisticated than she'd first given it credit for. Whoever had built it had included a memory wipe program that eliminated recent information as soon as it was obtained; only the hard code on the door was available through the datapad.

Pressing one of the buttons, Padmé monitored the changes in the code as it was entered — and then erased. Only a perfect match to the code would unlock the door, but if not done in a quick sequence the door would read it as incomplete. Pure genius — and pure frustration on her part.

“Any luck?”

Whirling, she dropped the datapad even as she automatically took up a defensive crouch. “What are *you* doing here?”

“These are my quarters.” Vader approached her and Padmé stood her ground. “Where else would I go when my wife is trying to break into somewhere she shouldn’t be?”

“Anywhere but here!”

“What did you hope to find if you managed to open that door, Padmé?” he lifted his hand as he approached, calling the datapad to it and breaking it free from the wires. “Freedom? Information?”

“A better circumstance.” She spat the words with a glare. “Anything is better than this.”

“Anything?”

He lifted his hand, as if to touch her and Padmé took a step back, her gaze pure venom. “Stay away from me.”

Shaking his head, Vader’s tone was complete condescension as he tsked softly, amused by her resistance. “Now, is that any way to talk to your long lost husband?”

“I’d rather you remained lost, or preferably, that I remained lost to you.”

His tone turned mocking. “Don’t tell me you miss your dear Republic?”

“The Republic was weak and corrupt. Even I can see that. Palpatine made it that way and in the end it didn’t have the strength to stand on its own anymore.” Her glare didn’t waver as she edged away. “It was a perfect opportunity for Palpatine to come in and completely destroy democracy. And *you* helped him do it.”

“I was doing what was best for the galaxy.”

“You were doing your best to destroy it!”

“One could say the same for you, wife. Your sole intention has been to undermine the Empire. An Empire that has brought law, order and peace — the very things you claim you wanted. Exactly *what* did you think you were going to accomplish?”

“Law, order and peace? You rule through terror and fear. That’s not peace; it’s suppression!”

“It all works out to peace in the end.”

If she hadn’t been so keen to get away from him at that moment, to move beyond his ability to reach for her, she would have been tempted to slap him. In fact, her palm itched to connect with his smug countenance. “One is achieved through earning people’s hearts and minds, the other through crushing them — the man I married would *never*—”

“But the man you married does,” he interjected smoothly. “I know what my actions have accomplished; what did you think yours would?”

“Does it matter?”

“Not exactly, but I am curious.”

“You and *your Emperor* took away everything I held dear. I want you to pay for it.”

“Want?”

Padmé edged further away, finally beyond his reach, but the iciness in her glare never wavered. “That hasn’t and won’t change; you will both pay for what you’ve done.”

“I see.” He smiled faintly. “Then why did you also attack the Alliance if we are responsible for all your woes?”

Padmé did her best to hide her surprise; she didn’t expect him to know about that and it caught her slightly off guard. Her expression darkened — but she didn’t answer him. She turned it around and asked him, “What do you know about that? Who told you?” Padmé suspected, though, she already knew the answer.

Vader gave her a haughty smile and answered. “Asajj. Who else do you think would tell me?” He saw the way his confirmation affected her; anger gathered in her eyes while a small twinge of betrayal swept through her. “She told me about your attacks on both Imperial and Alliance targets. I found it interesting; I wanted to know why.”

Vader studied Padmé a few seconds before saying, “Like I asked, why did you attack the Alliance if you feel the Empire is responsible for all your woes?”

He knew why she wanted nothing to do with them. That couldn’t be reason enough for her actions. And she certainly didn’t owe him any further explanation.

Vader didn’t seem to notice her reluctance to answer and continued. “When I called for you and you didn’t come I had assumed you joined up with the Alliance sympathizers.” Somehow, despite what the Alliance had done to their children, Vader kept his observations impersonal. Speaking of the past with an intense look she remembered well — and one that made her uncomfortable — his words were almost musing. “After all, you were one of democracy’s biggest proponents. I can assure you the very idea of you doing that did *not*

please me. You're place is here with me. So, imagine my surprise when I was informed you have no sworn loyalty to them whatsoever."

"The Alliance is a spineless travesty and the Empire corrupt. Neither one has any right to rule the galaxy."

Nodding, he turned and walked away a few steps, giving her some space — only to pause and look back at her with an unreadable look in his eyes. "Jedi Hunter. I don't even have to ask why you were doing something so brash."

"It kept Jedi alive and safe and out of your reach." Her response was smug and a little brash. "And I knew it would drive you crazy. You must have hated knowing someone was always one step ahead of you and not knowing who they were."

Stalking towards her, his tone took an edge. "You caused me plenty of aggravation and denied me the lives of Jedi who are traitors to the Empire."

"And now they're safely hidden away where even you can't find them."

"Don't be too sure about that."

Toe to toe, blue locked on brown as their gazes clashed and ice glared into ice. He wasn't touching her, but he might as well have been. Despite her intention to win, despite her intentions to be free of his physical influence, his scent tickled her olfactory senses as she breathed. A flush of awareness raced through her system. Unable to maintain the glare, lest he see what she was hiding behind it, she turned and walked towards the viewport, bracing her hands on the ledge.

Vader let her go, watching her; that his wife had been the Jedi Hunter, head of the band of terrorists — as his Master had called them — and outwitting him for almost eight months chafed. She'd been everything he'd been intent on destroying and he hadn't even known it. Her actions had led to a loss of his Master's respect, to a questioning of his abilities in subduing a rogue element and his abilities as a warrior. But then, he'd never claimed to be a hunter and Padmé had been cagey prey — prey he was certain Asajj would have had trouble tracking had the two not already been in league.

Despite all of it, there was a twisted sense of pride to her accomplishments.

She'd evaded him for eight months. No small feat. She'd outwitted, killed or misled every single assassin, bounty hunter or spy he'd sent to gather information on her band's clandestine activities. His wife was probably the most intelligent and wily opponent he'd even encountered — Jedi or not.

"You've had an impressive career, Padmé."

"*What?!*" She turned to look at him, perplexed by his words.

Vader walked towards her — she hadn't gone far — and braced one hand on the viewport window above her head, looking down at her. "Terrorist leader and Jedi Hunter. That first attack was a real disaster, but you learned the way of it quickly enough."

Her jaw slackened a touch at his almost admiring tone, her eyes widening incredulously.

"I know it was slow going at first, after all, being a renegade isn't something you're accustomed to. But I see it's become like second nature to you; something I admire in a person greatly, even when that person is my wife." He brushed a finger across her cheek. "You might say... *especially* when that person is my wife."

She jerked her face away, regaining her stoic mask. He'd blocked her in by the view port on one side and she sidled away. "If I didn't know better I would say you're complimenting me on my handy work."

"If you want to take it that, way by all means do. It isn't every day I find out *my wife* has been attacking Imperial facilities and getting the better of me."

"I'm not out to impress you or make you proud." She took another small step away. "All I wanted was to cause *you* enough problems so the Emperor would see you as incompetent."

"I must have been some incentive."

It was the way he said it that triggered her temper, sparking a reaction she'd never have used on Anakin. Her hand lashed out, connecting with a resounding *crack!* to the side of his face and catching him by complete surprise. Vader's head turned with the blow — he'd been too long a soldier for it not to — but the reaction wasn't augmented by Jedi speed nor was it exact in its timing.

Her slap stung like hell.

No words had accompanied the blow, no accusations, no insults — just the stinging pain of flesh connecting with flesh and the throbbing of the impact.

Padmé glared at him and turned away, marching across the living room to the viewport almost directly across from the suit's main door. She retook up her pose there, not looking at him, her whole posture screaming anger and her emotions swirling about her so violently they were a mishmash of many.

Vader lifted his hand to his cheek, tasting the metallic tang of blood on his tongue. His face throbbed where she'd struck him, bringing back memories he'd thought long banished of a childhood in chains. Calling on the Force, he eased the sting with a touch, but knew it would take ice or a trip to the medical station to ease the swelling.

She'd struck him like a pro.

Pushing away from the viewport he wasn't about to let that be the last word. Anger hadn't taken control just yet — he was still too stunned — but the icy calm that came over him whenever he entered combat had taken hold. Using it as focus, he resumed their verbal sparring, his tone patronizing. "Relax, Padmé, you're not going anywhere."

"I wouldn't even be here if Asajj hadn't betrayed me." The explosive statement was accompanied by a glare over one shoulder. "I should've known something was up with the way she'd been behaving these last few months. If I had paid closer attention and realized it, I would have separated myself from her, as far away as possible, as quickly as I could — or killed her if I'd had no other option. Proof that I can't trust anybody in this galaxy."

"No. Proof that you were foolish enough to think Asajj wouldn't find out you were the Jedi Hunter and not turn on you."

"I managed to do it for eight months under her nose and she never suspected a thing. Not until you started looking for me."

"I was looking for the Jedi Hunter; he just happened to be you."

Padmé's lips creased in a nasty smirk, dismissing him before turning to look back out the viewport.

It was a clear dismissal, but Vader was in no mood to be dismissed. Walking up behind her, he leaned down to whisper in her ear. "I was searching for you too. And now that you're here I'm not letting you go."

A shudder raced through her form. She felt the weight of that promise clear through to the soles of her feet and the proximity of him made her stomach tense and knot. Wants and desires best kept buried seemed to surface within her whenever he was nearby despite his treatment of her. It was something that was becoming harder to control each day more that she remained in his presence. She was determined not to succumb to it. "I'll get out of here if it's the last thing I do."

Vader chuckled softly in her ear and kissed the shell.

Flinching, Padmé turned her head and made to move away — but Vader grabbed her arm and pulled her back, spinning her so she had her back to the viewport sill. Her mouth opened to rail at him as Vader captured her lips in a hard bruising kiss. Padmé struggled, pushing and clawing at him as she struggled to get away, fighting not only him, but the internal effects his kiss sparked despite its brutality. Snapping at him, her teeth sank into his lip.

With a yelp, Vader released her, taking a step back as he brought a hand to his mouth. His fingertips came away blood stained and he lifted his gaze to hers in surprise.

Sliding along the viewport, Padmé backed away, her tone carrying a hard edge. "You think because I'm here I'm going to allow you to touch me? There's a reason why I ignored your 'summons' all those months ago. I want nothing to do with you!"

Regaining his composure, Vader wiped his sleeve across his mouth, clearing his lip of the crimson fluid. Two. She'd struck him twice today. But the last word would be his — and his look turned smug "But you have *everything* to do with me. Every move you've made has been because of me. And it's all led you here."

"*Not* by my choice. I didn't come here willingly, and I will *not* be taking part in this 'happy' reunion, or whatever you want to call it."

The look on Vader's face became truly mocking and he couldn't help the belittling smile that formed. "Actually, Padmé, you *did* come here willingly. Asajj lead you right to me; no questions asked."

He had a point — but she was unwilling to concede it even if she couldn't hold his gaze. Looking away, she scanned the room, frantically thinking for something, anything, to regain the upper hand. "Asajj was—"

The sound of the door opening drew both their attention, cutting her off — and the white and blue astromech that trundled through let out a happy series of bleeps and whistles as his sensors picked up the occupants of the room.

“Artoo?” Padmé stared at him incredulously, her anger with Vader overshadowed by the presence of a friend she’d never thought to see again.

The little droid squealed and rolled forward quickly. Padmé jumped the back of the sofa as Artoo continued to chirp and beep, except this time it had taken on a scolding quality — and she didn’t think it was directed at her. She dropped down beside him, wrapping the little droid in a tight hug his reinforced casing could easily handle.

Vader’s response to Artoo’s scold a moment later, as she was easing away from the droid, was chilling.

“Yes, she’s here and I intend to keep it that way.”

Turning, she glared at him with a promise in her eyes that said it would be a cold day in all the Corellian hells before that would happen.

A smirk crossed his lips and he tilted his head in acknowledgement of the gauntlet being thrown down between them. Padmé would do her best to escape him, and *he* would do his best to ensure that *never* happened. She was his wife and her place was at his side.

Padmé turned her attention back to Artoo. “Artoo, it’s so good to see you. I thought you’d been destroyed back on Mustafar!”

The droid tweedled something that sounded rude and didn’t need interpretation.

Padmé laughed.

Behind her, Vader stared. It was the first laugh — *real* laugh he’d heard from her since her disappearance. It was the uninhibited sound he remembered — and it felt as if he’d been sucker punched. It was a sound he wasn’t certain she remembered how to utter and to hear it so *spontaneously* simply because Artoo had said the equivalent of ‘oh ye of little faith’ in droid! Shifting, he eased around, knowing Padmé wasn’t paying *him* any attention — and stared at her face.

That was the face he remembered in his dreams. The smiling, laughing, carefree woman who’d joined him for a picnic at the falls on Naboo.

Artoo kept Padmé smiling as they chatted, Padmé using the built in translation interface to understand him when he used complex noises she didn’t quite get. Vader, on the other hand, understood him perfectly and listened with half an ear to the conversation.

Artoo suddenly beeped and chirped excitedly, swiveling his dome around with an obvious query. Padmé glanced down to look at the translation — but Vader was already filling it in.

“He wants to know if Threepio is here with you.”

Padmé’s expression hardened and she tensed. “I don’t know where he is,” she responded nastily. “And I don’t care. He’s probably been melted down for scrap by now. That personality of his was as abrasive as the man who programmed him.”

It was like being slapped again — and the buzz of his comlink as it sounded fell in the heavy silence. He snatched it. “Yes Captain?”

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Lord Vader, but you’re needed on the bridge.”

Vader crushed the comlink in his hand without replying, leveling a menacing glare on Artoo as he headed for the door. “Keep her company, Artoo; but no shop talk.”

The droid tweedled a question and Vader stopped, turning to face them both. “No. Padmé cannot leave here until I say it’s safe.”

Artoo obviously believed he’d be enough of a bodyguard for he gave a series of long and ardent toodles along with an insistent chirp. “I don’t care *who* is on board or not right now. Padmé doesn’t leave my quarters. No shop talk and *do not* talk about me!”

Padmé watched as the guards outside the door was tossed aside as he exited the room, the door closing behind him and leaving her in peace with Artoo. With a smile, she turned to the couch, feeling her whole being relax now that Vader was gone once more. She patted the floor beside the couch with her foot.

“No shop talk, no leaving and no talking about your Master,” Her eyes twinkled and she felt lighter than she had for a long time. A friend she’d thought lost had been restored to her; she suspected the feeling would be the same upon the twins’ return — only more so. “Well, then, why don’t you tell me what you’ve been doing since you’ve stayed with *him*?”

Reading the information on the translation screen, Padmé smiled faintly. The little droid didn’t sound too thrilled about what missions he’d been on, and only touched on various worlds he’d been to since the formation of the Empire.

Mostly, he spoke of the fighter he’d kept running since he and Vader had returned to Coruscant, and touched on the various modifications they’d added to the ship. Padmé wasn’t surprised to note that even Artoo referred to him as Vader and not Anakin; Vader would have likely insisted on it.

The reference to Coruscant seemed to spur the droid’s memory and he toodled a question.

Reading the display, Padmé shook her head. “I didn’t know he’d think I was dead, Artoo, but I don’t know exactly what happened between Mustafar and when... when I woke up. All I know is that when I *did* wake up, the galaxy I had left behind was gone and *everything* had changed.”

Artoo tweedled a sad question, turning his dome towards the door to get his point across — and Padmé didn’t need the translation to know what he was asking — but she read it anyway. “No, Artoo. Vader is no longer Anakin; he’ll never *be* Anakin again. My husband and the man you called friend are dead and that... that... ogre wearing his face is sadly mistaken if he thinks he can keep me here.”

A sad, mournful sound came from the little astromech and Padmé read the display. “I’ll miss you too whenever I get away. But it won’t be *because* of you that I’m going.” Patting his dome, she stood, her gaze going to the viewport when a flicker of blue caught her attention; Artoo had flicked on a hologram. Her lips firmed when she saw what it was of.

“Turn it off, Artoo.”

He did so, bleeping a question.

“It’s not that I don’t remember what he was, Artoo, I do. But he’s no longer that man. Vader’s destroyed Anakin, and despite the fact they look the same, can you honestly tell me

Anakin would have led any of those raids you've been on?"

Artoo was suspiciously silent and Padmé moved away, only to stop, shifting her line of thought as she looked back at the little droid. He didn't deserve to have her anger taken out on him. "I'm sorry, Artoo, you're just trying to understand."

He whistled an apology and she smiled, marching back to hug him for the second time that night. "You're forgiven. Can you do me a favor?"

The eager tone in his electronic answer couldn't be mistaken as anything but a 'yes'. "Can... you move this couch?"

He bleeted something rude, but affirmative, and Padmé glanced back to where the couch had been when she'd first entered the room several days ago. "Can you move it back over there? Where it used to be?"

With a bleep and hoot, saying Artoo *knew* where it went as he knew every nook and cranny of Vader's apartment, Artoo wheeled over to the large sofa and *pushed*. Padmé moved out of the way as Artoo made short work of the task. One side moved without protest, dragging slightly along the floor as Artoo pushed one end, and then the other.

Within minutes it was back to its original position and she shook her head in disgust. "I spent all afternoon trying to do that and you make it look easy!"

Artoo snickered, the melodic scale run chuffing in the droid's imitation of the human equivalent. A quick glance at the translation screen as he returned to her side and she burst out laughing; *I should; I am stronger than the average droid*.

Patting his dome, she shook her head. "No arguments here."

There was a pause before Artoo queried her again, his dome swiveling towards the kitchenette, the almost uncertain note in his question telling her he was aware of the tension between them. Artoo served Vader and his answers to her earlier questions made it clear he was loyal. But would he always be loyal if he saw the way Vader was treating her?

Reading his question, Padmé's lips twitched. An olive branch. "Do you even know your way around the kitchen, Artoo?"

The derogatory statement spoke for itself and Padmé laughed. "Alright, alright. Show me your prowess and wow me with your culinary skills. I know your Master doesn't cook much; let's see if you can do any better."

Artoo bleated and rolled determinedly towards the kitchenette, Padmé following him and willing to be distracted for a while. The longer he stayed, the longer the silence would be held at bay — and it was possible Artoo's bold claim that he knew every nook and cranny of Vader's apartments could eventually come in useful if she could turn the little droid to her way of thinking. She tucked that little tidbit of information into the back of her mind and allowed Artoo to order her about the domestic task.

It made for a surprisingly enjoyable evening and, once food was served, Artoo made a relaxing dinner companion. It was, she reflected, the most at ease she'd felt since arriving. It was a shame it wouldn't last.

Month Twenty Four, Day 4 PEF, morning

[b][u]Chapter 29 [/b][u]

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Four PEF

Early Morning

Vader suppressed a yawn as he approached his quarters. The chrono on the bridge had read two and a half hours past midnight and he couldn't believe the blundering of his attack force. People had died for their incompetence, replaced by more... *motivated* Officers. Resupplying his ships was supposed to be a menial job, not something that required his full attention and several hours of intimidation tactics.

Morning would show what kind of people now replaced those commanders stupid enough to disagree with him. For now, all he wanted to do was get inside, watch Padmé sleep for a few minutes and retire to bed to get what little sleep he could before the tactical planning session set for just after eight. As it was, he was going to be in an irritable mood and dealing with idiots all morning; he needed his sleep.

Opening the door to the suite, he stopped, blinking; the lights in the lounge area were still on — and the couch had been moved.

Stepping in, he let the door close behind him and headed towards the lounge, kicking off his boots as he did. As he walked, he undid the buttons at his collar, pulling them open with irritable flicks of his fingers. Yet, every step he took, the Force assailed him with emotion leaving him no doubt that Padmé wasn't asleep as he'd thought her to be. While he *wanted* to turn around and head straight for bed, her emotional upheaval was like a distress beacon, calling to him.

His suspicion was confirmed when he rounded the corner and found her in her new favorite position — by the viewport staring at the stars. Distress and despair fairly radiated from her, her whole body tense, her hands white knuckled where they gripped the edge of the viewport ledge. Exhaustion lined her frame, new stress lines already having formed at the corners of her mouth — but holding that exhaustion at bay was the anxiety. The anxiety was feeding her despair and her distress which only served to work as a circular process as each emotion compounded the other leaving the woman before him.

Irritated to no end to see her not only awake, but in this condition, he was still careful to modulate his question so it didn't *sound* as irritated as he felt. "Why are you still up? It's late."

Unbelievably, the blood left the rest of her hands as her body became impossibly more rigid.

Stifling a yawn, Vader sighed in frustration and crossed his arms over his chest, watching her and waiting, hoping she'd answer him sooner rather than later so he could go curl up on the pillow calling his name. He'd much rather curl up with Padmé and have her scent and the soft sound of her breathing lull him to sleep but he knew that wasn't a possibility. Not yet anyways. Still, no matter how tired he was, he wasn't about to leave without getting her to talk. He'd never be able to sleep knowing she was standing at the viewport in this condition.

Knowing Vader wasn't going anywhere until he got an answer; Padmé finally spoke, her words strained. "I don't want to go to sleep."

"Padmé, you have to. You're exhausted."

"If I do, I'll dream about them again... and I don't want to."

The pain in her voice rendered him speechless and he didn't quite know what to say. A heavy, pregnant pause passed as Vader sought the right words — but Padmé spoke again before he could find them.

"I want the dreams — *nightmares* to stop."

Nightmares.

Ah; his chest tightened and he well remembered his own and the gut-wrenching terror associated with waking to find your nightmares aren't just dreams your mind thought of to terrorize you as you slept, but that they'd become reality. "How long have you had them?"

Padmé didn't answer, but the way her body stiffened and the shaky breath and quiet sob that came out of her mouth when she tried to speak told him what he needed to know. She had been having them for a long time now. He understood the pain that went along with them. Nodding his head, he was surprised to find common ground with her on this. "They can be some of the most unpleasant phenomena you ever experience."

Turning, she glowered at him for patronizing her.

Meeting her look squarely, Vader saw no hint of recognition — and realized she didn't know of what he spoke. Smiling faintly, he *almost* laughed. It had been his dreams, and his attempts in preventing them from occurring, that had paved the road to this moment. Shaking his head slightly, he wiped the smile from his lips. "So quickly you forget? The dreams about my mother; about *you* dying in childbirth."

His words had an instant effect. Padmé's eyes widened fractionally and her body jerked. Her lips tightened and she inclined her head to him, a silent acknowledgement of what he'd been through — as Anakin — because of his dreams. Turning back to the window, she couldn't stop the bitterness that rose to the surface, or the distraught words that spilled from her lips. "You have your outcome. I'm still waiting for mine."

Walking towards her, Vader slid his hands onto her shoulders and squeezed. "Then we'll wait for it together."

Jerking away, she side stepped and backed away, keeping her hands in front of her to ward him off. "No."

A patronizing *Why?* burned on the tip of his tongue, but he didn't utter it, and instead stood still watching her, *feeling* her emotional turmoil. How she'd ever eluded his grasp feeling

such strong emotions was a testament to her willpower and her ability to ruthlessly suppress them in time of crisis. Unfortunately there was no current crisis for her to concentrate on and he didn't intend to let her find one — which meant she now had to deal with it and Padmé didn't seem to know how.

It was the expression — that blank, stony expression she wore constantly — that drove him to speak. “I can feel everything,” he informed her matter-of-factly. “You can't hide it.”

The mask slipped, showing her confusion and she relaxed a fraction.

“Pain, despair, anger. It's all coming off of you in waves.”

Her eyes flashed. “Then you must feel my hatred too.”

Shaking his head, Vader only confirmed what she had begun to suspect. “You don't hate me. But you do feel betrayed and abandoned.”

Because I was. The words echoed through her mind as she turned her gaze back to the viewport but didn't see anything beyond her reflection. *Because I was.* The reflection of an embittered, desperate woman — a woman who'd lost everything no matter how hard she'd fought to keep it. *Because I was.* Her eyes burned — but Vader continued.

“I felt it the strongest in the kitchen when you had that knife in my chest.”

The taut lines returned to her body, but it didn't deter him.

“You *really* feel I abandoned you.”

It was the marveling tone in his voice that brought her back around. “Because you did. You abandoned me so completely and so thoroughly that it was devastating. I never felt so alone in my life. The pain was unbearable knowing what you had done. You turned your back on us and everything we fought for and believed in.”

“The only thing I turned on was the corruption that was eating the Republic from the inside out. I never wanted you to feel alone, and I never abandoned *you*. Never *you*. *Everything I did was for you*; your safety, to make sure you'd survive. To make sure you and our children had a secure future.”

Spreading her arms wide with a sharp laugh, she indicated the ship and the distance between them. “And look where it got you!”

His answer, however, was calm, controlled — and far too smooth. “It got me the end result I wanted.”

Intense pain overrode every other emotional response she was feeling at that moment. It grabbed her heart, squeezing like a vice as his words confirmed her deepest, darkest fear. *She* had been the reason for his fall — and she lashed out at him for it. “This isn't what *I* wanted. Not like this. I didn't want to be living in a galaxy under Imperial rule, and I didn't want to have my husband play a part in creating it — and saying he did it for me! It kills me inside knowing I'm the reason why you did all this. I hate it!”

Two steps and she was within his grasp again, his hands closing over her upper arms like a vice as he bent his head to look her straight in the eyes. His blue orbs shone with intensity. “No!”

Padmé returned the look, not comprehending that interjection, but Vader seemed disinclined to elaborate. “No, what? I don’t hate what you’ve done? Did you ever once think to ask what *I* wanted? Did that ever once cross your mind? Or did you just do what you thought was best? Damn the consequences or how I felt.”

“I have no regrets for any of my actions. They’ve made me the person I am now. Given me power unlike anything the Jedi ever taught me. And despite all that’s happened, they gave me what I wanted — you safe at my side.” Vader lifted one hand to run his fingers through her hair, stroking it back over her ear. “Yes, everything was for you. But don’t you see; we’ll be able to do so much. We have the galaxy at our fingertips.”

Tearing herself from his grip, her look turned venomous. “I don’t believe you; the things you’re saying. You don’t remember what I said to you on Mustafar — *before you choked me!*? I told you, you were going down a path I couldn’t follow. *The same still holds true now!* Every day I have to deal with what’s happened to you, what you’ve become and all the things you’ve done, *and know it was all done because of me!* You have no idea what that’s done to me; how it makes me feel; the burden I carry knowing I’m your catalyst.”

“You’ve always been that.”

The almost loving tone behind his calm comeback made her stomach clench and twist. “I never wanted to be, not like this.”

“You appreciate nothing,” Vader said derisively. He was beginning to get annoyed with Padmé’s lack of understanding for his actions.

“What you’ve done? No!” Taking a deep breath, she braced herself and plunged ahead. “It’s because of all this that I began attacking you. Instead of helping me — *saving me*, as you blindly thought you were doing — you took everything away. I felt empty inside; dead. I wanted to feel something other than the horrible weight you placed on my shoulders, but I didn’t know what or how. But then, I figured it out. Every time I attacked you, destroyed one of your facilities I was gaining back something of myself while taking away a piece of you. Every military station, every research facility I hit, every Jedi I saved, I knew I was getting back a part of myself and causing you another wound.”

He laughed. “There were no wounds, Padmé.”

“Not ones you can see.” Her condescension was obvious; she’d known who he’d been too well to know how to attack the places that had mattered. “I mean the wounds to your pride and ego. Knowing I could damage you that way and cause trouble with your Master was all the reason I needed to keep going.”

Her attitude earned her another of his condescending grins — it was a look she’d come to hate over the last few days. “I never thought I’d see the day my wife — the Defender of Democracy — would be out for revenge.”

Padmé crossed her arms over her chest. “Not revenge, Vader. *Redemption* — for the atrocities you committed in my name.”

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me.”

Unaffected by his disbelief, she explained. “Every attack, every victory against you, I was able to absolve myself a little bit more. I knew I’d never be clean of the stain you placed on

me but I knew I could at least find some redemption for *myself* because of your sins.”

He stared at her, completely taken aback by her view on things. She was supposed to be grateful, to fall into his arms with joy and take her place willingly at his side. She *wasn't* supposed to be embittered, to feel sullied by his actions or responsible. She was *supposed* to be *grateful*!

Satisfied that she deemed him speechless, and enjoying that small victory, Padmé smirked bitterly and went back to looking out the viewport.

Incensed, Vader stalked up behind her and grabbed her by the shoulders, his fingers digging painfully into her flesh as he jerked her backwards. Unprepared for the violence of his assault, Padmé stumbled back only to be braced by his body. Flush, her back to his front, Vader's grip tightened fractionally as his fingers flexed. She tensed at the show of dominance, feeling threatened as her body responded almost instantly to his touch — and being aligned so intimately to his.

Vader enjoyed the feel of her as she shuddered against him and then tensed in an effort to deny it. In a low voice that made her skin crawl, he made her a vow. “Some day you'll understand why I did what I did. You'll see it was the right choice and you'll thank me; you'll appreciate it.”

Bless the man for his ego. Finding her composure thanks to his arrogant — and absurd — claim, she laughed shortly, once. “It'll be a cold day in all the Corellian hells before that happens.”

Leaning down, he chuckled softly, his breath feathering across the sensitive skin of her ear and making her shiver. “We'll see.” Nipping at the shell of her ear, he drew another shudder, using her body against her.

Padmé jumped, desire flaring through her veins like a molten stream from that small action. Craving his touch and his kiss — and the solace they represented — she ruthlessly quashed it down before she could do something stupid like turn in his arms and accept what he was offering. Pulling away, she deliberately moved to the sofa and sat, keeping her eyes averted. Her internal struggle to extinguish the embers of desire was carefully hidden.

“I'm tired. Leave.”

Watching her knowingly, Vader reached up to the already undone buttons on his shirt and popped another, and then another as he walked towards her. Padmé kept her face averted, but he could feel her eyes on him. He undid three more before slowly easing down beside the couch. Letting his hands dangle between his legs as he braced them on his knees, he caught the high color in her cheeks and reached out to run his fingers across it.

He waited for her to turn her head as she must — and she didn't fail him as he moved his fingers away slightly and her body followed, desiring the contact no matter how much she claimed otherwise. Smiling enticingly, he modulated his suggestion to echo his touch and waited until her eyes traveled up the length of his exposed chest to meet his gaze. “If you're tired then come to bed. I have a way that will help you sleep.”

There was no doubting what he suggested, and his cobalt eyes had darkened with intent, anticipation and promise; it was a look she remembered all too well from when *Anakin* had

felt amorous. Gritting her teeth, she fought it. She fought his allure and her own reaction to him; she fought the little devil in the back of her mind that urged her to let go and take what he offered; she fought the need, the desire and the memories, brutally reminding herself that this was *not* her husband. This was *not* Anakin, no matter how much he looked or sounded or acted like him, this was Vader — and Vader had killed her Anakin.

Glaring at him, she found her voice — and added a strength she didn't truly feel to her words. "I told you; I'm not sleeping with you."

He eased in closer, using his physical presence as an enticement. Padmé should have felt menaced — and she did, but not in the way she'd expected. He was too close to comfort and she eased away, leaning back so she was almost reclining against the arm. Vader followed, not touching her beyond the brush of his fingers against her face, but the open panels of his shirt brushed hers and echoed the promise of the caress she saw in his eyes.

The expanse of naked flesh flashed in and out on the edge of her gaze and her fingers twitched before she curled them into fists, struggling against the need to feel those taut muscles under her palms once more.

Hovering above her, his free hand bracing his weight on the far side of her and keeping her practically pinned between him and the couch by no more than the tenuous touch of his hand, Vader continued to stroke her cheek. He seemed to sense her weakness and played upon it, trailing his fingers from her cheek and across the line of her jaw. Unconsciously, her head turned into his touch and he leaned down further, his lips almost touching hers and his voice husky. "You should be. You're my wife; it's your place."

Fighting to keep her composure, her treacherous body responded to his touch. "My place is out here, as far away from your bed as this prison allows." Knowing she had to do something or risk surrendering to him, she pressed back away and curled, bringing her feet up between them. Planting both — thankfully covered — feet up to his chest, she used the leverage to push him away. Her tone turned curt as the distance between them grew and she deliberately sharpened it. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I want to get some sleep, *out here*."

He caught her feet, using them to maintain his balance as he stumbled backwards a little, amused by her resistance — and her inventive method for regaining her distance. His fingers tightened around her ankles for a moment and he looked at her with barely disguised desire. He'd conceded the match to her yet he, too, had won. And he wanted to give her a taste of what she had given up.

In one swift motion he was between her legs. Bracing himself against the couch, he brought his body in line with hers, his knee feathering the material of her pants as he hovered above her — just enough that they were almost touching. His other hand cupped her face and he tilted it to catch her lips in a passionate and voracious kiss.

So surprised and taken completely off guard by the move, Padmé's first reaction was to respond. However, not the way she did the day before when he kissed her and bitten him to remove herself from his arms. This time her response was one of passion; returning the kiss and reveling in the feel of him so close to her. She wanted to reach out and touch him; pull him to her and wrap her arms about him.

The sensible part of her mind, though, screamed in protest and she was keenly aware of what was happening and the position they were in. Images of the pleasures she once shared with him in such an intimate way flashed through her mind. She told herself she had to stop. As quickly as the passion ignited, Padmé squashed it — and struggled to break the kiss, pushing against his chest to get him away from her.

Vader had been expecting it. Despite her response to him — and he was pleased by it — Padmé had been pushing him away ever since arriving on the *Exactor*. He felt the tension and desire thrumming under her skin every time he was near but she always kept herself at a distance. He was able to close that gap a little bit tonight but he knew he had better stop or risk losing any ground he had gained.

With difficulty, he reined in his own passions, tamping down the fire that burned inside and broke the kiss, allowing Padmé to push him away. He then pushed himself up with his arms to stand before her. Taking in her lust-struck appearance and sensing how her body was humming from their quick moment he decided he had better leave or he might not be able to control himself.

Besides, he knew all this was just another step closer in getting her into his bed where she belonged — willingly — and where he should technically be. “As you wish,” he said softly. “Sleep well, Padmé.”

Turning, he walked away.

Padmé struggled to get control of herself as she watched his retreating form. Her body trembled and her breath came out in ragged gasps. Her skin was heated with desire and her lips tingled from his kiss. Watching him leave, disbelieving her own eyes and ears that he would leave her in such a vulnerable state and not take advantage of it; she followed his form as he tugged his shirt from the waistband of his pants. It slid easily from his shoulders, revealing that tempting expanse of flesh to her gaze once more as he stepped into the bedroom — the garment was tossed aside, probably towards a pile of the same. Vader half turned, seemingly unaware that she watched him and — as he made to close the door — his hand dropped to his belt — and stopped. His fingers tapped it, almost thoughtfully.

“You’re welcome to change your mind.”

She snapped her gaze up, turning her head to rigidly look away, her silent denial making him chuckle. But he — thankfully — didn’t pursue the matter.

Unfortunately, her brain seemed more than willing to fill in the gaps as to what would come next in his little nightly strip show and the image of those long, tanned fingers as they undid the buckle and then the fasteners to— *No!* Forcing her thoughts elsewhere, she sat rigidly, taking deep breaths to calm herself until the sound of the door closing eased some of the tension in her frame.

Vader was gone, ‘safely’ behind his bedroom door — but that didn’t change her inability to deal with the renewed wants and yearnings she fought within and almost gave in to. Taking a few more deep breaths and feeling the desire subside; Padmé was able to turn her focus onto where she was looking and to the stars beyond the viewport. The twinkle beyond the pane was both soothing and frustrating.

There were so many and any one of them could be where her children were being hidden.

The thought of Luke and Leia was enough to bring her back into a semblance of equilibrium and dampen the heat simmering through her veins. Chancing a look over her shoulder, she noted that the lights had gone out in his bedchamber and exhaled softly. Pushing herself heavily to her feet, she moved back to the viewport to brace her weight against the edge again.

Contrary to what she'd told Vader, she didn't *want* to sleep. She never wanted to sleep anymore; the nightmares always found her and sleep — where it had once been a refuge — had simply become one more prison she couldn't escape; a prison of her mind where she could scream and be overlooked; cry and not be heard; bleed and left to die in silence. Every nightmare shredded her heart a little more, leaving a gaping, invisible wound no one could see.

Exhaustion was preferable to that; almost *anything* was preferable to sleep and she couldn't remember the last time she'd slept — really slept — and felt rested upon waking. Deprived the stimulants and artificially healthy methods for keeping sleep at bay, Padmé knew her exhaustion was still at a point where she was in danger of drifting off if she remained stationary too long.

It wouldn't be the first time she'd fallen asleep on her feet, and so she began to pace, careful to keep away from Vader's door. The minutes crept by, as she knew they must, and to keep her mind active, Padmé focused on what Max would be doing at that moment and silently hoping he would have enough sense to cut his losses and run. If she hadn't contacted him by now — and she hadn't — she wasn't going to.

She, just like anyone else in their little endeavor, was expendable.

The minutes turned into hours and the ship entered hyperspace, making her stumble with the sudden jolt to fall heavily against the back of the couch. Her limbs were leaden, her eyes sagging closed where she leaned only to jerk open a moment later. Exhaustion was catching up with her again and she couldn't let it.

Fighting it with every fiber of her being was no match for the heavy need for sleep her physical body craved. It didn't care that she would be tormented; it didn't care that the dreams were always more powerful and more difficult to escape when it drug her down. It didn't care that she'd be worse off when she woke than if she hadn't slept at all. It never did and, when exhaustion reached the point she was at now, there was little she could do.

Please... no more...

It was her last thought as she curled forward over the back couch.

Month Twenty Four, Day 4 PEF, noon

Chapter 30

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Four PEF

Morning

Silence surrounded Vader as he stared at the ceiling in his bedchamber. He'd been awake for several minutes, mulling over the events of earlier that morning, one arm stretched out across the side of the bed where Padmé could have been if he'd but pushed a little harder.

Except he wanted her willingly; knowing what she was doing and accepting him for who he'd become. Seducing her was possible, but she'd only regret it later. He wanted no regrets, no accusations and no withdrawal when he finally made her his again. If the scene that morning had proven anything, it was that she was still drawn to him physically. Her body remembered his touch no matter how much her mind currently rejected it — and it was a start.

Padmé *would* be his willing partner; he was simply at a loss for how to do it.

A scream shattered the early morning silence and he was on his feet before the sound died away. He knew that scream in his nightmares and from the more recent events surrounding his current predicament. *Padmé*. Darting from his room into the main living area, Vader headed for the lounge as a second scream filled the air, and the sound of her body hitting the floor by the sofa and of her flesh striking the legs of the table beside it.

"Don't do this... you can't take them, they're my children... mine... my..."

Vaulting over the couch, he pushed the table away with a thought to land beside her. What he saw tore at his heart strings. Padmé's hair was wild, her clothing twisted, but her face was awash in tears as her eyes moved rapidly behind their lids, caught in the throes of the nightmare from which she couldn't wake. "Padmé."

"You have no right... no... no!"

The raw anguish in her voice sent shivers down his spine. Reaching down, Vader grasped her by the shoulders and shook, only Padmé lashed out in her sleep, striking him. "Padmé, wake up; you're dreaming."

"Don't touch me... don't touch me! You can't do this, they're my children!"

"Padmé."

"No! Give them back!" Desperation colored her voice as she struck him again, her fists pummeling his arms and legs, as she flailed to get away. "Please... no... don't.. please... let me hold them... just hold them! Give me back my babies: Luke! Leia! Where have you taken them... where are they? They need me... NO!"

“Padmé!”

“No... no... *no*... *NO!*” The word started as a whispered denial but gained force and momentum as she repeated it over and over and over again, thrashing in his grip as she seemed to be caught in the very act of watching their children being taken away. Caught and unable to do a thing about it, she was lashing out subconsciously, trying to change reality.

A change that was, at that moment, impossible.

Vader softened his tone, his own desperation to wake her, to bring her from the nightmare mounting with every passing moment. “Padmé, wake up. Please wake up. Come back to me.”

Whatever the cause, his words seemed to have the desired effect as Padmé went rigid in his grasp, her eyes flying open. Blue clashed with brown — and a chill ran down Vader’s spine. Anguish and agony shone in those glistening depths, unmasked and unhindered by conscious thought. Confusion was quick to encroach as she stared at him without recognition before casting a look about fruitlessly for their children.

Unable to bear it, to watch as the realization she wouldn’t find what she sought, Vader pulled her into his arms, tucking her head to his chest and stroking her back. Anything to keep her from retreating into the catatonic state of the last time she’d had a nightmare. “You’re fine, Padmé,” he whispered into her hair. “I’m here; I’ll find a way to make everything right.”

His voice was a trigger and he felt her crumble, her arms going about him as she clung to him with surprising force. The after effects of the nightmare were devastating and, with her emotional control nonexistent, Vader was buffeted with wave after wave of raw emotion. Pain that ran so deeply, it cut like something physical, driving into his heart and twisting with agonizing precision. Her pain called to his, searching it out within his soul and drawing it forth unconsciously.

Padmé’s fingers dug into the flesh of his back, her nails biting into his skin as she clutched him. “Bring them back,” she begged, broken and defeated, the nightmare having sapped the strength of will that enabled her to be strong. “I want my children back, Max; I need them with me.”

Vader stiffened, but she didn’t seem to realize it as she continued to sob against his chest. *Max? Who the hell is Max? Whomever he was, now was not the time to address it.* Padmé was a quivering mess and in no shape to answer his questions.

Rocking her within the confines of his embrace, he murmured soft assurances, continuing to hold her, to sooth her with his touch. She curled against him, as if to burrow within his body, her emotions roiling about him like the clouds at the base of the Nabooian falls. Continuing to murmur a string of reassurances he wasn’t sure she heard, he felt the tears before he heard them. Padmé’s body seemed to heave, the weight of her supported awkwardly on his thighs.

Shifting, he changed his grip on her. Sweeping her upwards, he regained his feet and turned, dropping to the sofa where she’d been sleeping. Padmé shifted with the new position, crawling into his lap with the barest of assistance, her body curled tightly against his as it shuddered and shook under the power of gut wrenching tears. They were soundless tears; the tears of a woman who’d lost everything meaningful and now had a hole in her heart and soul that hadn’t even begun to mend.

In his lap, a part of Padmé was conscious of who held her — and that part didn't care. Max or Vader, at that moment her conscious mind needed the contact and her subconscious would permit it. Without that link to the physical world she would become lost, a prisoner to the memories and regrets; a slave to the blurring image she could no longer bring into focus. Instead, she concentrated on the almost rhythmic caress of the hand rubbing her back.

Up.

Down.

Up.

Down.

Circle.

Circle.

The caressing hand gave her a point of focus, a point of reference — something to draw her from the depths of the pit that threatened to engulf her with memories and self loathing. That hand was strong and she focused on it, her mind shifting from the grief, to the tactile in an effort to staunch the emotional hemorrhage.

The warmth under her cheek came to her next, the indentations and ridges of a well defined, muscular chest seeming to materialize from the numbness around her. Other sensations began to creep in: scent; the musky, reassuring and familiar scent of man, taste; the tang of blood on her tongue from where her teeth had cut into her lip during her nightmare, touch; the feel of her fingers and nails digging into flesh and warmth surrounding the tips, sight; focus returned as she realized her eyes were open, a wall of muscled flesh for them to feast upon — a very *familiar* wall of muscled flesh and one she'd once spent a long time admiring.

Everything else crystallized in a rush and she realized she was sitting on the sofa where she'd chosen to make her bed, in *Vader's* arms, clinging to him like a small exotic primate. If that wasn't disturbing enough, she was taking *comfort* from the fact he held her. It drove her into action and she tore her hands away from his back, pushing out of his arms, desperate to escape her feelings and his grasp. The mad scramble sent her not just out of Vader's lap, but off the couch.

Had Vader not moved the table, she'd have hurt herself. As it was, only her pride was stung as her backside connected with the carpet.

Staring at her with more than a touch of concern and perplexity, Vader leaned forward, bracing his forearms on his knees. "Are you all right?"

Ignoring his solicitous concern, Padmé scrambled to her feet, unable to meet his gaze head on — but that didn't stop her from keeping a wary eye on him from the corner of one. Vader, watching her intently, straightened as she stood and met that gaze, sideways though it was. Determined to put some metaphorical distance between them, Padmé wrapped her arms about her waist, absurdly missing his touch.

"Why should you care?"

"You were dreaming about Luke and Leia."

Padmé visibly shuddered, knowing how badly she could and did react to her dreams. The thought of Vader seeing it was humiliating and infuriating. Her gaze slid from his, looking anywhere but as she tightened her grip on her own wait. “Well... I don’t need your help.”

If Padmé had been looking his way even a little, she’d have seen the disbelief etched in stark lines across his face for a brief moment before he pushed to his feet and took a step towards her. “You were a mess. It was pretty clear to me you needed it. And you were more than happy to take it.”

Padmé turned her head to look at him, unable to do a thing to shield the haunted look in her eyes that always followed the nightmares. “I was disoriented; I didn’t know where I was.”

“Obviously. You called me Max. Who the hell is that?”

Taking an uneasy step back, Padmé wondered how she could have been so disoriented to let Max’s name slip. The two men were practical opposites when it came to physical conditioning and mistaking one for the other shouldn’t have been possible. Regardless, the way Vader was eyeing her made her uncomfortable — she wasn’t about to give him a reason to go after Max — and who was he to begrudge her comfort anyway?

“Just someone who used to work for me. Nobody important.” she answered finally, an edge to the words she chose oh so carefully.

“He must have been if you called me his name,” Vader said, trying not to sneer. He didn’t like it one bit that another man’s name came from her lips.

Padmé caught the tone in his voice he was trying to hide and for reasons she couldn’t explain felt a little provoked by it. “He was real good at making sure I was a constant thorn in your side,” she offered up.

“Really?” Vader said, his expression turning neutral.

“Yes,” Padmé replied, “and don’t worry; I’ll never call you his name again. In fact, I’ll never come to you for comfort either. I don’t want or need it from you.”

Turning on her heel, Padmé made to move away, to put some physical distance between them, but Vader wouldn’t have it. Her answer was no answer at all and he suspected she wasn’t telling him the truth. Catching her by the arm, he spun her back towards him

“Padmé, don’t do this.”

Shaking off his hold, she glared at him. “Don’t do what?”

“*This.*” With a motion between them and to the couch, he fractionally shook his head. “I can see how hard it is on you not having our children here. You’re dreaming about them.”

“So what?” The sting of tears made her eyes shine in the semi-darkness. “You’ll wave your hand magically and make this all go away? I’ve been dreaming about Luke and Leia ever since I found out they were taken from me — and that happened because of *you*! Because of all the things you’ve done!”

Vader didn’t appear to hear her as he tried to soothe her. “I’ll find them, Padmé.”

“*No you won’t!*” Padmé shot back angrily. “I don’t want you anywhere near them!”

"I'm their father. I deserve to know them too."

"*You don't deserve anything!*" She snapped, tears spilling over and down her cheeks. Anger and desperation warred within her breast as she was unable to reign in the emotional upheaval of the last few minutes. "You have no right to be called their father!"

Whatever reaction she'd hoped to elicit, Vader seemed unwilling to give it. He remained infuriatingly calm, regarding her steadily, like a hunter watching his prey. Except in this case, it was more like an onlooker watching the caged animal — for that's what she was, and he refused to let her forget it. His eyes glittered when he spoke, his tone surprisingly even and reasonable, almost conversational. "I have as much right to be called their father as you do to be called their mother. It took both of us to create them — or did you forget that part of our marriage."

The shudder that raced through her wasn't one either of them could interpret and her emotionally unstable frame of mind didn't help. Thrill; terror; anticipation; loathing. It could have been any number of emotions or a combination of them all. She didn't dare examine what she was feeling too closely. "It doesn't matter; none of it *matters*."

"Of course it matters; they weren't a vengeance of the Force—"

"As far as I'm concerned they might as well be — and you will *never* have any right to be called their father. *Never!*"

Vader's eyes narrowed as he took in the emotional storm that surrounded his wife — and bit his tongue. The turmoil was almost overpowering and he could sense that, even now, she wasn't fully in control herself yet. It would be several hours before she could handle a civilized discussion and Vader was in no mood to be her punching bag — verbal or otherwise. Still, there was much he could say, much he *wanted* to say, but Padmé wasn't ready to hear it.

The dreams, her dreams, were every bit as devastating as any Force Vision he'd ever received with regards to his loved ones in trouble and, until she was back on an even keel, arguing with him wasn't going to help. It unnerved him to see her this way; to be fighting with her and not comforting her — to be exchanging insults instead of embraces when it was obviously what she needed.

Still, her small victories at that moment seemed to be helping her and he would allow her those. Anything — just about anything — to get a reaction that was the broken creature she seemed to become when dreaming about their children.

Seeing Vader wasn't about to lash back, Padmé swept away from him; anywhere that wasn't near him. She had no desire to be in his presence. Striding the long way around the lounge, she detoured towards the kitchen, knowing her shaking wouldn't subside anytime soon.

This was torture.

No contact of any kind. No one there to hold her, reassure her or banish the nightmares for a moment. No one who could give her the solace she craved, the reassurance that this was all worth something in the end. That there was a purpose; that she would triumph. She was alone, utterly and completely; a prisoner to her worst enemy, her inability to separate his handsome

features from the man she'd loved and the Monster he'd become and — worst of all — a prisoner of her own mind.

Images, as fuzzy and indistinct as always, tormented her. Asleep or waking, it didn't matter. She'd had but a glimpse of Luke and Leia when they'd been born. A *glimpse* of their beloved faces as she'd given them their names just moments before the consequences of Anakin's Force Choke had taken their toll.

Gripping the edge of the counter, she didn't see it as those hazy images played back in her mind, closer now because of her dreams and her circumstances upon waking no doubt. She could again smell the sulfuric atmosphere of Mustafar; she could see Anakin racing towards her ship as the ramp lowered; could *feel* the joy swell in her breast at the sight of him — unharmed — and *knew* Obi-Wan had to have been wrong. This was Anakin — *her Anakin* — the man who had risked everything he'd dreamed of to ensure their happiness. The man who'd challenged the Jedi to accept someone different than them and succeeded; the man who...

"He killed younglings, slaughtered the Jedi, turned his back on everything we believed in," the whispered words were harsh, falling from cracked lips as Padmé sought to distance herself from the man in the next room — a man she would *never* acknowledge as the father of her babies!

The man who was Luke and Leia's father was dead. *Dead!* A sob escaped, the weight of her loneliness pressing down like an oppressive blanket. Here, she had nowhere to go, no one to turn to but the monster who was responsible for her misery. Here she was alone — completely alone — and cut off from the support net she'd worked so hard to cultivate and build. People who asked few questions, expected fewer answers and simply wanted to see things get better before they got worse.

Was that really too much to ask?

The tear streaked face of the disheveled woman staring back at her from the polished chrome runner around the center of the kitchenette walls had no answers.

Back where she'd left him, Vader watched his wife walk away. Storming off would have been too powerful a statement; she hadn't the energy. He frowned as she disappeared from view, crossing his arms over his chest as he considered what she'd said and the effect of her nightmares.

Would they continue to build in frequency or was it simply that her capture had delayed something that was a normal occurrence? It was a disturbing possibility and one he had no control over. Until she came to him, until she *asked* for his help, there was nothing he could do, no help he could give — if she wanted it. Which was as frustrating as it was irritating — she *should* want it and yet, despite the obvious strain, she pushed him away.

It wouldn't have been so galling, except he *wanted* to help her, to ease this burden; he wanted to share her pain and suffering, anything that would diminish the impact of the dreams. Yet, she refused it. She argued with him, accused *him* of being the one who had stolen their children; accused *him* of the atrocities committed by the Alliance.

People called him a Monster, but the people who had stolen their children and kept them — willingly and knowingly — from their mother while watching her decline into despair could teach *him* a few things about monstrosities.

Stalking back towards his bed chambers, he mechanically went through the motions of changing and getting ready for the day, keeping his senses focused on his wife. If she wanted it or not, he was concerned about her. Never had Vader seen anything frazzle her like this. He'd known how badly she'd wanted to be a mother, how badly she'd wanted to be the mother of *his* children specifically, but never had he dreamed separation from their child or children would have this effect on her.

Still lost in thought, but now dressed, Vader headed for his office. The sound of the 'fresher running told him where Padmé had disappeared to and she was safe enough in his quarters for now. The solitude might help — and Padmé had no reason for *not* accepting whatever help he could give her.

Except this Max person.

Fortunately he had more than one resource on his wife's activities and Asajj tended to be more forthcoming with her information since Padmé's return to him. It was time he tapped that resource.

Month Twenty Four, Day 4 PEF, evening

Author's Note: Now, some of you have sent me notes wondering why we're emphasizing the fact that Vader and Padmé don't get along and why we don't move along from here. What you're not seeing is that yes, they're not getting along, but there are dynamics at work between them that make these chapters necessary. Not only necessary, but vital for later chapters. Bear with us; the angst is a pervasive factor through the story, but there is more to it than that — good things come to those who wait.

They've been separated for almost 2 years; they have a few issues to work out and many of them won't be worked out to either's satisfaction in one sitting.

Plus, if any of you have ever tried to hold onto anger, you can probably empathize with Padmé's position; it's not always a rational thing.

Chapter 31

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Four PEF

Evening

"Lord Vader?"

On the bridge, Vader tapped the fingers of his right hand against the gloved left, shifting his gaze from the view port and his thoughts back to the present. Padmé might be on board, but he still had a job to do for his Master. Wife or no wife, he was still the second in command to the Empire and his *special* talents were necessary in various campaigns. Fortunately, Asajj was capable to doing some of those tasks — with relish — and he had no qualms about sending her. The further away she stayed from Padmé the better.

"Yes Commander?"

"You said you wished to be notified when Lady Ventress had made contact."

"Thank you, Commander."

The young commander saluted smartly and returned to whatever task he'd been performing.

Vader turned back to the viewport for a moment. It had taken almost twelve hours for Asajj to respond to his insistence she contact him — hours in which he'd returned to his quarters and found, much to his surprise, that Padmé had changed out of the clothes she'd been wearing the past four days. She had changed into some of the pieces he'd had brought in specifically for her. It might not have been the dresses of state or the beautiful gowns he

hoped to see her clad in once more, but it was a start; she was willingly wearing a gift of his. It was the first outward sign he'd seen that her opinion of him might have been changing.

But it was the pure *pleasure* he'd derived just from seeing her wearing something he'd chosen for her that had blindsided him.

It was a pleasure he'd long since forgotten; just looking at his beloved wife and the relish of seeing her choice of adornments. It had been the same feeling he'd once felt every time he'd seen her wearing the Japor snippet tied to her robes of state or among the multitude of jewelry she'd seemed to wear whenever they were alone together. It was the same feeling that used to envelope him whenever he saw her wearing that snippet — and just that snippet.

Deliberate or not, the memories those feelings evoked had been of times both of them had once thought gone forever and here — with her in his quarters — they had a chance to recapture them; if only she could see that. Whatever the reason — memories, feelings or simply a well honed sense of preservation — Vader had been determined not to fight with her.

Padmé hadn't been any more talkative than she had that morning, and the air about her was still a churning mass of emotional turmoil — he'd wisely said nothing about it — and taken a hint from that morning's conversations. Padmé needed victories, but she also needed kindness; so Vader had complimented her — sincerely.

The surprised expression she'd turned his way moments before he'd stepped out again had been worth it.

Striding away from the main viewport, Vader left the bridge and headed for the turbo lift. With how long Asajj had kept him waiting for her reply, she could wait until he reached the sanctuary of his office. It took several minutes for Vader to reach his suite. Using the side door, the one that led into the office Padmé had not yet seen, Vader nodded to the two troopers standing watch outside the main door. They saluted smartly as he disappeared inside, completely attentive and alert for anything.

As the door closed behind him, Vader noted — with some pleasure — that Padmé's turmoil was less noticeable. Whether that meant she was simply shielding it from everyone again, or if she was actually feeling better he would have to determine after speaking with Asajj. The general feel, however, was that his wife was confused; over what he wasn't sure but he would certainly ask.

Settling in his chair, Vader punched in the code to access the frequency Asajj would be transmitting on and her image appeared, an irritated tilt to her lips. "*You wished to speak with me, Master?*"

It was the way she said it that turned the title into a slur and Vader, for once, let it slide. Asajj had information he needed and threats he couldn't implement at that moment would get him nowhere. "A report on your activities for starters, Ventress; your reply was less than timely."

She blinked, her head jerking back at his mild tone, well aware that this was when he was his most dangerous — and promptly supplied the information requested. "*The first target was eliminated this morning and the safe house where she was entrenched has been neutralized. There were no leads as to who was behind her continued disappearance; they've covered their tracks well.*"

“Is that respect I hear, Asajj?”

“Grudgingly given,” she conceded darkly. “They were well equipped and someone carefully planned for the eventuality of discovery. There were no clues as to the locations of the other safe houses in either database or personnel.”

And if Padmé had played any role in it, Vader knew the details would be flawless. Consumed with the need to find their children hadn’t dulled her attention to detail when she was able to focus on the bigger picture. Detail had always been one of Padmé’s strongest points.

“Indeed. Considering who orchestrated their disappearances, it doesn’t surprise me.” The flare in Asajj’s eyes was visible even through the holo; Padmé’s betrayal was still fresh and would likely be a wound that wouldn’t soon heal. Vader ignored it and continued. “What can you tell me about the rest of Padmé’s band of terrorists?”

“Mostly disillusioned idealists with the odd mercenary hired for specialist jobs.”

“And under which category does Max fall?”

“Max?” The surprise in Asajj’s voice was as unmistakable as the subtle widening and then narrowing of her eyes. *“Where did you hear about Max?”*

“My wife mentioned him.”

On the other end of the holo recording, Asajj’s mind was churning a mile a minute. Padmé had told Vader about Max? Somehow she doubted that; it would have sealed Max’s fate as a dead man and — much as she hated to admit it — Padmé wasn’t the kind to wish Vader on anyone. If Vader were to ever learn the truth about Padmé’s relationship with Max, it would mean a substantial cut to the man’s life expectancy.

Much as she hated Padmé, Asajj had nothing against Max and felt a sense of twisted kinship with him — they’d both been used to some degree by Padmé; both been lied to and deceived. Each had made their choice to throw in with the ex-Senator and each had been burned. Putting more of a burden, and essentially a death sentence, on the Slicer’s head was not something Asajj found she relished. But what could she tell Vader that wouldn’t give him too much information and still satisfy his curiosity?

Knowing she had to give an answer, Asajj shrugged, the image on Vader’s end doing the same.

Vader waited patiently, well aware that Asajj wouldn’t tell him everything, it wasn’t in her nature, and would likely hold something important back.

“Max is a slicer,” Asajj answered finally, waving to the area she knew he’d be in, “and a good one. He’s the one who ensured we had the funding necessary to perpetrate our activities. He’s the one who would have hacked into your personal files and retrieved what information he could with regards to whatever Padmé wanted to see.”

“Names and locations of Jedi.”

“Precisely.”

“Effective.”

“Very. It’s... unlikely he knew of the tie between Padmé and yourself.”

“He simply hacked into my files because she asked?”

“And for the challenge.” Asajj informed him dryly. *“He enjoyed taking on the impossible and we learned there was nothing he couldn’t do. Padmé had him collect what information she required from whatever sources she felt necessary. Slicers are not always in it for personal gain.”*

Vader conceded the point with a nod. “His skills are considerable then.”

It wasn’t a question, but Asajj answered it anyway. *“He was always able to provide the information we required, though not always in the timeframe Padmé wished.”*

Leaning back in his chair once more, Vader stroked his chin with two fingers as he considered the information Asajj had provided him. It was no small feat to penetrate his personal files and any slicer who had the ability to do so would be a considerable asset to his own personal staff. The beauty of it was that the man was practically unknown and wouldn’t be missed should he disappear — either as a shadow agent or permanently.

“Find him,” he ordered abruptly. “Find this Max and bring him to me.”

“And my current assignment?”

What about her current assignment? Vader considered the consequences of pulling her off it completely. His Master, should it be discovered, would be less than pleased Vader had pursued a personal curiosity over such a crucial task. The fingers on his mechanical hand flexed in an echo of his inner displeasure; he’d already risked much on personal interests and didn’t dare put off Asajj’s duties longer than necessary.

“It’s been five days since Padmé’s ‘disappearance’. I’m sure her group is worried about this. Find what would be your rendezvous point with them. If we can eliminate them— if they are in fact still intact — or lure them to our side of the battle, all the better. Focus on your current task but follow up any leads you obtain on Max. *I want him found.*”

“As you wish, Master.”

Vader cut the transmission, an obvious dismissal and one Ventress would not miss, and tilted his head back to stare at the ceiling as his fingers drummed thoughtfully on his desk. Asajj was hiding something about Max — but what? There had been no mistaking the genuine respect in her tone for her former colleague and anyone who could inspire respect in the Force adept would need to be watched closely. First he would need to locate the man; then he would need to discover just what exactly this Max’s relationship was with his wife.

Whatever the case, Asajj’s reluctance for the topic had done nothing to ease the uneasy feeling another man’s name on his wife’s lips had generated. If anything, it had only increased it.

The solution, Vader decided, was to ensure his wife thought of no man but him in any capacity; be it friend, confidant or — Force forbid — lover. No. Max couldn’t be her lover, despite the easy way the name had slid from Padmé’s lips. She still loved him, had known he was alive despite her denial of that fact and would never have betrayed their vows.

But even as he pushed to his feet to join his wife in their quarters, the uneasy feeling remained. What if he was wrong?

Padmé's Hidden Base — Month Twenty Four, Day Four PEF

"No, we haven't heard from either of them yet," Max told the Captain impatiently. "Until we do, we can't even *think* about the next target."

"My men are getting restless, Max," the female Trandoshan informed him with a shake of her head. "No work means no pay — and we have other jobs we could be doing."

"Look, I know tempers are getting hot with the inactivity, but Padmé's never let us down before—"

"So you keep saying. We'll give you two days; if we haven't gotten a message from her by then, my crew and I will look for other employment."

Sagging back as the holo disappeared; Max rubbed his temples to stem the ever constant headache that had become his companion. Since Padmé's disappearance less than a week ago, things had begun to fray at the edges and this was only the latest in a series of ultimatums from the captains and crew Padmé had held together so effortlessly. What Max couldn't understand was *how* she'd done it.

"Sir?"

Speaking of headaches... "Yes, Threepio?"

"The daily update, sir."

"Nothing, right?"

"Regretfully, no."

Lifting his gaze to the golden protocol droid, Max pinned him with a look. "Were you expecting some kind of change?"

"It is unlike Mistress Padmé to be out of communication for such an extended period of time when we are in the final stages of planning an assault."

"I know."

"And it is unlike her to permit those she cares about to worry as to her well being."

"I know."

"Additionally—"

"I get it, Threepio." Cutting off the droid was like a fine art; to be savored whenever possible. "What conclusion does that leave you?"

"Oh dear... that she is either captured or dead, sir."

The droid sounded so darned upset, Max's lips kicked into a reluctant grin. "Padmé's a fighter, Threepio. If she *is* captured, she'll find a way to send us some kind of sign."

“While I dislike contradicting you on the effectiveness of my Mistress, sir, I fear I must inform you that Mistress Padmé is more inclined to try and escape than ask for help. Past escapades have shown her to be a most independent woman.”

No kidding. Max pushed out of the chair — his position as defacto leader in her absence chafed — and reached for the caf that had been left for him on the opposite side of the desk. “Okay, so what can we do to help her?”

“I am afraid, sir, that there is little we can do. Unless we can determine her whereabouts, the chances of lending any kind of assistance are remote.”

“And with Asajj missing, there’s no way of knowing who might have taken her. I don’t know how she does this.”

“What, sir?”

“This,” Max waved one hand towards the office door and the base beyond it. “I never realized exactly how good she was at motivating people and rallying them together. It’s like... she’s the core algorithym and without her the rest of the equation falls apart.”

Threepio was suspiciously silent as Max paced away from the desk, sipping on his caf, and stopping beside the room’s one small viewport. Silence reigned in the room as Max considered his options. Padmé had been absent for five, almost six, days. Not just absent, but she’d disappeared like a wisp of smoke in the wind. No sign, no trace — no debris. He’d sent out missions to try and locate her shuttle, but either it had been destroyed or captured and the computer wiped.

Even the best slicer couldn’t protect a homing signal from being eliminated by a complete data dump and memory wipe.

Tensions on Padmé base ship were high, higher than Max had ever seen them and that included when she’d initially begun recruiting people to work for her. The account he’d set up to siphon off funds from Imperial assets was still intact but it hadn’t been touched by anyone except him; and only when he needed to bribe someone to stay — but credits only worked for so long when certain types were idle. And *these* certain types were threatening desertion.

Whatever Padmé’s hold had been on this group of rag tag misfits, Max knew he didn’t have it. “Do you think I should disband us, Threepio?”

“Sir?”

“You heard me; is that what Padmé would do?”

“I would not presume—”

“You’re not,” Max shot the droid a dark look. “I’m asking. What do you think she would do in this situation?”

“We are a hunted group, sir. The longer we remain together, the more likely it is that we will be discovered.”

“In other words, we’d have more luck without the baggage.” Max turned back to the viewport, longing for the days where things had been simple... like cracking the codes on the Emperor’s accounts to steal credits. He hadn’t asked to be in charge; more and more he found

he was floundering, completely at a loss for how to deal with the multitude of people Padmé had so effortlessly won to her cause. Give him a console and a line of code any day. He wasn't cut out for this, and he knew it. 'We'll give her two days,' he decided at last, bringing the total tally of Padmé's absence to seven days. "If we haven't heard from her by the deadline I gave the captains, we'll have to assume we won't."

"But *sir!*"

Threepio's protest made him smile and Max finished off his caf before turning to face the droid, his lips twisted with displeasure. He owed Padmé too much to simply give up without trying to find her — though taking custody of her annoying droid was almost enough to repay that debt — but he couldn't do it while trying to keep her little gang afloat.

"Two days, Threepio," Max asserted quietly. "Then we can begin searching for her exclusively. Two days... let's hope we hear from her by then."

"And if we do not?"

"Then we're no worse off than we are now. There's a message for disbanding the group in Padmé's file. I'll need you to translate it into the different languages used around here while I figure out how much everyone is owed and make the payments. The last thing I want is people thinking I owe them credits."

"Immediately, sir. Was there anything else?"

"Yeah..." Max dropped back to the chair behind the desk. "Stay out of my sight for the next two days; just because I'm stuck with you, doesn't mean I like you."

Threepio seemed to bristle and his words regained their clipped, formal tone — something that had been lost somewhere in the last few days. "Yes sir."

The door closed behind the shuffling droid and Max shook his head, turning his attention to the accounts program he'd created for Padmé. The exact balance, who was owed what and when it would be paid was already pre-programmed in — but Threepio didn't need to know that and it would keep the golden nuisance out of his hair. A wry smile twisted his lips. Padmé might have left Threepio in his care, but it was a constant reminder of her absence and one reason he was so worried. The droid meant more to her than anything; if she'd been able to come back for him, she would have.

Where are you Padmé?

Month Twenty Four, Day 4 PEF, night

My humblest apologies for not getting this updated sooner; a few items kept going wrong with my writing disk and I've been fighting with it for the last month.

Jade's not a happy camper.

On the bright side, it's working again and my writing was all recoverable; so on with the show!

Big welcome to new readers — posted and lurkers alike — and thanks for reading

Chapter 32

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Four PEF

Evening — Vader's Quarters

"It's okay, Artoo, I'll get it in a minute."

The astromech toodled a disrespectful blat, his grasping arm lifting the bowl from the countertop anyway before he turned and carried it to the island where Padmé was finishing the place settings. With a roll of her eyes, she thanked the little droid — apparently she wasn't the only one who felt the need to be needed.

Artoo stayed for only a few minutes to ensure she had everything before beeping a promise to see her later; he had his own duties to complete despite making the time to visit her between them. Waving him away with a 'Thank you', Padmé took her seat as the door closed behind the astromech, leaving her once again in solitary silence. His presence had been both pleasure and pain — a reminder of their reunion the day before and the ensuing conversation regarding the man Artoo had chosen to ally himself with.

Vader had believed her dead. It was hard to imagine, hard to believe, but she couldn't doubt the evidence of her senses. Funny; when Vader had told her, it hadn't mattered... but when Artoo had said it, the memory chose to linger. It didn't help that the little droid had chosen to punctuate his revelation with images; in particular the image of a grief-stricken Vader.

It was an image that chose to haunt her now as she scooped food from the serving dishes onto one of the plates at the island absently, lost in thought, and proceeded to lift one of the creations to her lips. The flavor of the concoction brought her back to the present and she glanced down at the plate in surprise. The memory of filling it and lifting the food to her mouth was absent — but it was tasty. Shrugging, she swallowed, taking a sip of water before resuming her meal and her train of thought.

Artoo's revelation, for some reason, had impacted her far more than anything Vader could have said.

But why? Perhaps because it was an outside observer's opinion? True Artoo was loyal to his Master, but he wouldn't have lied to her about something like that. And... as marvelous as the droid was, he couldn't fabricate holograms like the one she'd seen on a whim. It bothered her to think that she'd caused Vader pain and suffering — and it bothered her to know that a part of her still cared. It was uncomfortable and confusing and completely unwelcome.

The object of her thoughts chose at that moment to enter the kitchenette, a faint smile creasing his lips as he took in the scene — and it was at that moment that Padmé herself really noted it.

An intimate setting for dinner; two place settings — at one of which she was seated — with food enough for two.

She didn't remember making that much even with Artoo's help and only had a vague recollection of setting the table. Was she at such a loss for contact she was now craving Vader's company? The thought was as disturbing as the previous ones — and almost as unsettling as the appreciation she saw in his gaze when it met hers.

Dropping her eyes back to her plate, Padmé considered her previous train of thought, her minds playing back the confrontation with Vader regarding her death and the information Artoo had provided. Was it all an act, or was there some grain of truth to it?

So absorbed was she in her own thoughts, she missed the tension in Vader's frame and the slightly agitated edge to his movements as he began to serve himself a plate. Her gaze never leaving the plate in front of her, Padmé considered her options and finally decided on a direct approach. For all his faults, Vader was forthcoming with information in the same way Anakin had always been. Taking a sip of her water, she twisted the glass between her fingers as she replaced it on the table and asked her question. It came out as more of a curious statement.

"You really thought I was dead."

Silence reigned in the kitchen, broken only by the soft clink of the serving utensils as they connected with bowl and plate. The sound was almost rhythmic as Vader continued to fill his plate. Glancing his way, Padmé waited to see if he'd answer her, but his hands never stilled and the pile on his plate grew. Rolling her eyes as he appeared to ignore her, she marveled at his ability to pack away food like a starving child.

But then, maybe it came from having *been* a starving child and one never outgrew it.

Finally, his plate full, Vader turned towards the island and settled on the stool across from her. He caught her eye, his expression serious and Padmé was surprised to hear a lingering echo of the pain he'd been through in his voice when he answered her softly. "Yes, I did. The entire galaxy thought you were dead."

"I know... but didn't you sense me?"

Her words seemed to amuse him and a faint grin crossed his lips. "No — you wanted me to?"

She scowled in response. “Of *course* not! But you told me yesterday you can feel everything; that I can’t hide anything from you. So how is it you didn’t know I was alive?”

Those unnervingly blue eyes of his seemed to look straight through her for a long moment and when he did answer it was clipped and matter-of-fact. “I was told you were dead. I saw your funeral. I had no reason to believe otherwise. I wasn’t going to go looking for somebody, who at the time, I thought was a ghost.”

Ducking her head to escape the intensity of his look, and a little unsure of what exactly he would see, Padmé considered his answer. There was pain underlying his words and that stung; despite the atrocities he’d committed she hadn’t meant to deceive him. If she’d been in control of her fate at the time, she would never have gone through with it, but she hadn’t known until waking just how far Mon and Bail had been willing to go.

Her head snapped back up as Vader’s fingers slid possessively around hers, the caress of those fingers tips making her shiver. Her hand remained limp in the wake of his emotionally charged response and, without protest, went willingly with his as he drew it between them on the table. Both of his hands encircled hers, gloved and bare, and she could feel the individual indentations of his metallic fingers and the *care* he took when touching her.

Vader’s gaze searched hers as he continued, “I know different now. But I remember watching your funeral; it was the worst day of my life. It was broadcast on every planet throughout the galaxy. No matter where I went, I couldn’t escape it or the reality. Seeing you in that open casket while being drawn through the streets of Theed; it was confirmation of my darkest fear and biggest failing. I didn’t want to believe you were gone. I couldn’t.”

There was a brief pause and for a moment, Padmé imagined that she could see Anakin shining through to the surface of those crystal blue orbs. They lightened in color, becoming the sky blue she’d always associated with when he was telling her something near and dear to his heart; it was the color they’d been when Anakin had first said he’d loved her — the same color they’d been when Anakin had heard about her pregnancy and called it a blessing.

It was the color that didn’t lie.

His gaze dropped to their entwined fingers and hers followed — even as he continued. “While I now know it all was an elaborate sham — even the way your pregnancy was faked — at the time, it was all too real... and too painful.”

Lifting his head, he met her gaze and she was able to see the sincerity, the quiet anguish the news of her death had wrought on him; it was within the depths of those eyes that had always been her undoing. “Just the thought— the idea that *I* was the reason... that what I had done was why you were dead was too much for me to bear. I couldn’t stand knowing I had lost you and that it was my fault. I didn’t want to live anymore. I felt like my heart had been torn out and I wanted to die just so I could be with you.”

Padmé shifted uncomfortably in her chair, watching him. He was barring his soul and she didn’t understand why — yet she wouldn’t, couldn’t stop him. A part of her needed to hear this; needed to know that he had suffered a loss as great as her own. She needed the reminder of just how much Anakin had loved her, of how much she had loved him and why. That need was making her as uncomfortable as his statements were starting to; she shouldn’t need to hear him say anything — but she did.

“But,” the resignation in his tone was a surprise, “I knew I couldn’t. My Master wouldn’t let me and the galaxy needed me. I had a responsibility to keep things in order.”

As if doused in ice water, his statement reeked of Vader and just as quickly, Anakin was gone. Like a candle snuffed in the wind, her husband disappeared to be replaced by the monster wearing his face. Anger, at both him and herself, spurred her into motion and she snatched her hand back as she pushed to her feet. “Yes, you did.” she spat out bitterly, moving to leave. “Nice to see where your priorities lie.”

She’d gone no more than a step before Vader reached out to grab her, his fingers closing about her forearm and using that grip to pull her back down to her seat. Pushing their dishes away with his free hand, out of the direct line between them across the island, he forced her to sit and the pressure on her arm indicated he wouldn’t be letting her go. “Despite what you may think or believe,” he told her succinctly, “they’ve always been with you. But I had a job to do. I still do. Regardless, I never once stopped thinking about you, or missing you. I’ve thought about you every day.”

“How could you?” She demanded caustically. “*You* were the reason I was dead.”

“Ah,” He told her with a half smile. “But you’re not.”

Glaring at him, Padmé remained stiffly in her seat. His smile remained, not the least bit fazed by her hostility, and she turned it instead to the hand that held her captive. Shaking her arm, she attempted to dislodge his grip to no avail and when she attempted to regain her feet to leave Vader refused to let her go.

“What did you do when you were told you were dead?”

The question — out of left field — was so ridiculously phrased that Padmé’s *almost* snorted in amusement. It was so absurd a part of her suspected it was supposed to throw her off balance and she wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of knowing he’d amused her. Adopting an unreadable expression, she shook her head — not trusting herself to speak without giving away her amusement — as she attempted to free her arm once more.

“Tell me,” he urged, squeezing her arm gently. “I want to know.”

It was the note in his tone that drew her gaze upwards again and, just like that, Vader seemed to have disappeared and Anakin was looking at her. Anakin was sitting across from her — and the grip on her arm was no longer constraining, but supportive. Hope blossomed in her breast despite the voice screaming in the back of her head that she was being played — that Vader was simply manipulating her... and against her better judgment, the words began and her gaze unfocused, drifting back to the day several months ago.

“I didn’t want to believe it.” The admission was soft, almost dream-like as she remembered the incredulity that had followed Bail and Mon’s announcement. “I didn’t understand why. When I was told my funeral had been faked... and that even my family thought I was dead — it was so hard.”

Absently, the hand that was caught by his began plucking at the underside of his sleeve. It was a nervous and unconscious motion from the days of their marriage when they’d been forced to discuss difficult decisions. His grip on her arm shifted, easing, as his thumb slid

across the slight bend on the inside of her elbow joint. The caress, for that's what it was, encouraged her and compelled her to continue and refocused her attention here in the present.

"I was told it was for the best. I was told it was to protect me from you." Padmé stopped, watching for some kind of reaction, but he was surprisingly calm looking. If he was upset by the revelation, he wasn't letting her see it. Her fingers continued to pluck at his sleeve even as she went on. "That as long as you thought I was dead, I was safe. That you'd never come looking for me... or eventually the twins."

Her throat closed, the painful knot that always accompanied thoughts of her children rendering her momentarily speechless. He could, she was certain, see everything in her gaze. Remembering the events following her coma, and the futile way she'd abased herself before people she'd considered friends, anger swept aside the grief and her eyes sparked with life.

"But I was tired of being dead. I was tired of hiding. I'd just spent six months in a coma, and during that time they decided how my life was going to be. They'd decided who I could see, who I could interact with and where I would spend the rest of my life... and they did it without my permission." She stopped before the emotional storm became too overwhelming, but had to continue, had to make him understand. Moisture cast a sheen across her eyes as she softly finished for him. "Like when they took Luke and Leia away."

Vader pushed to his feet, making to move around the table and Padmé could see the intent in his posture. Scrambling, she put her arms out to ward him off, not touching him but keeping him just beyond reach.

"Don't. There's nothing you can offer that I want."

"You say that now." His expression turned almost knowingly smug, like he knew something she didn't. "But that will change."

Darting towards the entrance of the kitchen, she scurried past him and out of reach, backing towards the doorway as he let her go. She was unreceptive to his advances, on edge because of how close she'd come to succumbing to them — and knew if she didn't distance herself she'd do something ridiculous... like take what he was offering. With a resolute shake of her head she continued to back away, her words for him as much as for herself. "No it won't. And the only reason I asked what you thought about me being dead was because of what Artoo said."

Her denial intrigued him as much as the tone in which she phrased it and he followed her, stopping in the doorway and putting his shoulder against the frame as he watched her. "Really? And just what did he tell you?"

Taking a deep breath, she gave him the truth — and wondered if she was crazy for doing so; he'd never believe her. "That when I didn't return to Coruscant you became concerned about it. You were ready to begin looking for me when you got word I was dead."

"It's true. Artoo didn't lie about that." He confirmed to her surprise. "But then he has no reason to."

"I just," her tone was monotone, unable to meet his gaze as hers settled somewhere over his shoulder, "wanted to know, that's all."

“Well, now you do. And I know what it was like for you.” His acknowledgement was soft, but she didn’t reply. Seeing he wasn’t going to get one, he continued. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to finish eating before it all gets cold.”

“Go ahead.” she told him indignantly, “I’m not stopping you.”

“What about you? Are you going to finish eating?”

“I’m already done.”

“Keep me company then. It’s not always pleasant eating alone.”

She laughed, a dark edge to it. “Speak for yourself.” Turning on her heel, she left him and headed back towards the lounge.

Watching her leave, Vader considered their conversation and its implications, tapping the fingers of his real hand against the opposite elbow. Interesting; Artoo had managed to reach her where he had not — instilling in her the curiosity to seek answers regarding his feelings at the time of her death. It implied she cared more than she was willing to admit.

Considering their previous conversations and the way she’d been since her arrival — coupled with the fact she was wearing a selection of the clothing he’d procured for her — the day had been most promising. While their morning had been rocky, they hadn’t *technically* argued and she’d spent the day doing something productive. Not just productive from the look of it, but something almost therapeutic; thinking about him.

He knew she’d spent a good portion of that time with Artoo and if spending time with Artoo would reveal the kind of revelations this evening’s dinner had yielded, he would encourage his little friend to spend *more* time with Padmé. On top of her practically civil attitude and demeanor, she’d made him, made *them* dinner — which implied she’d been intending to eat with him. Everything in the kitchen screamed of an intimate dinner for two and that alone gave him hope for things becoming what they had once been.

Conveniently ignoring the fact their morning had started with a discussion about another man, Vader turned back to his meal. Things were looking up and just possibly she was starting to see things his way. It was time, he decided, to ensure she did; and, given her mood, he suspected he knew just how to accomplish that.

Month Twenty Four, Day 5 PEF, morning

Chapter 33

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Five PEF

After the surprising conversation with Padmé over dinner, Vader had retired to his office to complete the detailed report that always accompanied a message to his master. With Asajj doing the work his master had assigned him, Vader was careful to phrase the report in such a manner that he didn't take credit for her accomplishments but also so that it sounded as if he had been the one to complete the assignment.

With a Master as wily as his, Vader was exceedingly careful when planning his own intrigues. A man who had overthrown a thousand years of galactic democracy and tradition in less than a quarter of a century was not someone to be toyed with lightly. Vader, ever mindful of that fact, labored diligently to cast no suspicion on his own activities all the while working towards the fulfillment of his own goals.

It was after midnight by the time he finished and the transmission sent, leaving him free to return to his quarters and the charms of his wife.

Shutting down his computer, Vader pushed away from his desk, his mind continuing to replay the unexpected — yet welcome — scene that had played out earlier between him and Padmé. It had been the unexpected confirmation he'd needed to know she thought about him and not just the twins.

It wasn't that he was jealous of his own children and the time their mother thought about them, but more the fact that she was his wife, she was here — and so was he — and together they'd have had a better chance at finding them. If she'd give him, *trust* him with whatever information she had, he'd be able to manage the search far more effectively. As it was, he made do with what information he had.

Entering his suite through the adjoining door to his office, Vader stopped upon hearing the soft moan that was becoming all too familiar. Two steps brought him around the corner and his wife into view. Padmé had fallen asleep sitting up, her head lolling to the side, her posture rigid. Her fingers nails dug into her knees in her sleep and, as he watched, she tossed her head in denial — and he realized with a jolt he was watching the beginning stages of her nightmares.

Striding forward, Vader crouched beside her and reached for her. His hand folded into a fist moments before reaching her as he struggled with what to do. Wake her and he'd be asking for trouble — but could he affect her dream momentarily? Give her the ability to sleep for one night without being traumatized by the images that plagued her every moment?

An idea began to take shape from the half formed thoughts the day's events had wrought. Padmé wasn't sleeping well alone and, if she admitted it or not, she'd found momentary solace in his arms when he'd woken her from the nightmare this morning. It stood to reason, then, that she'd sleep better in his arms — where he conveniently wanted her — rather than

alone on the couch. Additionally, in this state of mental vulnerability, he had a chance of affecting her dreams. Exhaustion would make her susceptible to suggestion and — very possibly — allow him to draw memories of a better time to the surface.

Having decided on a course of action, Vader extended his hand once more, his finger tips brushing against the smooth skin of her face only to slide around into the soft fall of her hair. She stirred at his touch and, without hesitation, Vader drew on the Force.

“Sleep, Padmé,” he murmured softly, stroking his thumb gently over the curve of her cheek. “Sleep... and dream of happy times; of a time before the war when you were a beautiful Senator with a dashing protector who worshiped the ground you walked on.”

Even in sleep, her mind resisted the call, but Vader had sharpened his skills since they’d last spoke of mind control and — in her slumberous state — she was no match for him. The Force wrapped itself about her, redirecting the train of subconscious thought from the twins and to a time before them — to a time where she’d been happier, carefree... to a time before betrayal and heartache.

She sighed softly as Vader concentrated, her breathing hitching once before her whole body seemed to relax and true, restful sleep took her for the first time in months. Her breathing shifted, becoming deep and even as she slumped into his touch, her head secure in the curve of his palm. A small, uninhibited smile crossed her lips as her dreams shifted and Vader stared.

His concentration slowly faded as he withdrew the suggestion slowly, watching her breathing for signs that the suggestion wouldn’t hold. Much to his surprise, it did. Padmé’s mind and body had been craving restful sleep for months and while her will resisted the idea of being controlled, in the end her exhaustion worked against her. The slackening of her features revealed worry and stress groves he’d been unable to properly see before due to the tightly controlled reign she kept on herself.

Sliding his arms about her, Vader lifted Padmé in his arms, his gaze never leaving her face. Her head shifted on his shoulder, the move so familiar — so reminiscent of the wife he missed — he froze. She was a dead weight in his arms that he didn’t notice, too riveted by the feel of it to be distracted by such a non-issue.

It was the first time in almost two years he’d had her in his arms without a fight and he relished it, soaking the sensation into his very pores to rekindle old memories. Memories of carrying her through the door from the balcony where their wedding ceremony had taken place — and into the bedroom that held their marriage bed; of sweeping her off her feet in her office when she’d refused to be distracted, simply to gain her full attention — and succeeding; of reaching her bare breaths before danger could strike to pull her close.

His grip tightened and she shifted her head again, her lips curling into a semblance of a smile. Turning with her in his arms, Vader ducked his head to press his lips to her forehead and then moved swiftly to his bedchamber. Padmé didn’t so much as stir during the short walk and he was careful not to jostle her, uncertain how long the Force suggestion would last.

Crossing the threshold into his room, Vader used the Force to sweep the covers back further before stepping up and gently placing his wife on the bed. A smug smile she wouldn’t see crossed his lips.

This was where she belonged. *This* was where she should have been sleeping from the first day he'd brought her here, not in his lounge on the couch.

With deft fingers that well remembered the tricks, he undid the jacket she'd chosen to wear and slipped it from her arms, dropping it to the side. Her belt, with utility pockets, and boots quickly followed, landing haphazardly by the side of the bed. He paused as he reached for her shirt and then quickly, before he could change his mind, divested her of it — leaving her in an almost sheer form-fitting tank top.

Better.

Quickly changing into his sleepwear, he slipped into bed beside her. Reaching across her he gripped the covers and pulled them over the two of them. Stretching out, Vader slid one forearm under her head and simply watched as she slept, her head turned slightly towards him to feather across his skin. It was a burning caress he did nothing to escape; on the contrary, he reveled in it.

Whatever her dreams, they appeared to be far more pleasant — for the moment — and she rolled towards him as he eased back against the mattress, her head settling easily into the nook of his shoulder. The tendrils of her hair, now falling out of their hastily arranged coif, tickled his skin and without thinking about it, he loosened it further.

Alloy fingers sinking to the second knuckle, Vader stopped, his eyes on her face as he searched for any sign she would wake. Long heart beats passed and her breathing remained deep and even and Vader relaxed, indulging himself in an urge he'd been fighting since he'd seen her again; he'd always loved to run his fingers — real and fake — through her hair. Careful to use as little force as possible, he untangled the burnished locks with a reverence he would show no living creature — not even her.

The silken strands caught on his fingers, wrapping around knuckles and sliding through joints in such an innocent caress, it made him ache. *Patience*, he cautioned himself, spreading the newly released length of her hair over her back and his chest. One step at a time. He'd finally gotten her where he wanted her, perhaps not in the fashion he'd intended, but Padmé was in his arms and in his bed curled contentedly around him like a sleeping Nexu.

His hand ran down her back, encountering the ridges of scar tissues the encounter on Geonosis had left on her — scars she'd chosen to keep as a reminder of when she'd finally claimed him... or so she'd once said. Why then, he wondered idly as his hand slipped under the fabric of her shirt to trace those lines, had she chosen to keep them if she truly felt the way she claimed? Her lips tilted into a smile as he withdrew his hand and threaded his fingers — his *real* fingers — through the strands across his chest.

Come morning, he thought confidently as he absently toyed with the strands, Padmé would realize where she belonged. She'd see that he wasn't to be swayed from this course — that he truly did want her where she now lay — and come to her senses. Additionally, her unconscious reactions to him no doubt heralded a more malleable wife come morning and he intended to exploit that unconscious reaction as best he could.

Unaware of his thoughts, Padmé shifted ever closer, her left hand sliding across the bare flesh of his stomach in an unconscious caress as she adjusted her head on his shoulder.

And Vader smiled.

What woke her Padmé didn't know.

Perhaps it was the softness of the pillow beneath her cheek that was in direct contrast to the sofa she'd become so accustomed to in such a short time. Or maybe it was the unfamiliar weight of the arm around her waist coupled with the heat of a disturbingly familiar male body spooning hers — his lips softly brushing the nape of her neck. Or it may have been an unpleasant twist in her dreams that had made her eyes fly open so suddenly.

Whatever it was, the comfortable and familiar feeling of belonging — the *rightness* — of that feeling in those first disoriented moments of semi-wakefulness had her eyes closing almost as soon as they'd opened with barely a glance at the chono by the bed. His voice, soft and soothing as he murmured something in his sleep, his arm tightening around her waist, pushed her back towards the pleasant dreams she'd been having.

Unconsciously, she edged backwards into his strength as if she could draw on it to use for herself, protectively cocooned in his warmth. It was far too early, just after half past three, and she was where she was supposed to be... in the arms of the man she'd loved for so many years... safe... sheltered from the...

Vader!

Padmé's eyes flew open just as sleep began to encroach on her consciousness once more, going rigid in his grasp. A quick, cursory glance as she lifted her head showed she was no longer on the sofa where she'd initially fallen asleep; she was in the opulent — decadent even — bedchamber Vader had created.

Warmth spread from his touch where his hand was splayed across her stomach, her shirt having ridden up at some point and the feel of those calloused fingers on her flesh made her shiver with anticipation and memory.

Mortified, Padmé rolled away without thinking and took the covers with her. The force of her momentum not only carried her away as she was almost instantly tangled, but over the edge of the bed as well. Her exclamation as she impacted the floor — a fall that was damaging only to her pride as she struggled to be free — was muffled by her newfound prison.

Of all the idiotic, laser-brained, arrogant, underhanded, high-handed tactics! Fuming silently, Padmé fought the covers, making an even more hopeless mess of them as she tried to free herself. He was going to get a piece of her mind when she got out of there — not just a piece, but a tongue lashing to go with it. She was not something... something...

She groaned in frustration; she was stuck. Her legs were encased in cloth from her pants and the blankets and there was little give in either one. She supposed she could wiggle out of her pants to free herself, but a glance — which was more of a glare — at the bed warned her it wasn't the best of ideas.

Vader hadn't stirred when she'd moved away and she had clearly seen the lines of exhaustion on his face earlier. Her odd hours were forcing *him* to keep odd hours which was resulting in both of them being exhausted, but that didn't mean the head turned towards her

wouldn't open its eyes at any moment — and the *last* thing she wanted was to be found with her pants around her ankles as she struggled to be free of his sheets.

Caught and torn between struggling to be free and risking waking him — or waiting until he woke on his own and was called away for the day — Padmé saw his lips draw into a frown and heard the rustle of fabric as his hand slid over the empty spot where she'd lain moments before. A smirk crossed her features at his minor distress before he settled back into silent slumber.

Easing back into the prison of fabric, Padmé collected a bunch near her head, folding it over one arm and into a soft ball-like shape. *Let him freeze*, she thought darkly, determinedly closing her eyes as she lowered her head. That she'd been sleeping the best she had since before her coma hadn't escaped her and she was determined to get back to it. *Anakin* had always needed little covers and Vader, who claimed to be her husband, would simply have to make do without.

The smug smile that crossed her lips as she was drifting off couldn't last until morning, but the pleasant thought of having thwarted Vader's plans for her — again — followed her down into her dreams. And, for the first time in a long time, she slipped into the dreamless slumber of the exhausted.

Month Twenty Four, Day 5 PEF

Chapter 34

Outer Rim — Month Twenty Four, Day Five PEF

Patience.

The word seemed to slide between the foliage, whispering its caution as one foot was carefully placed, and then the other, ensuring perfect balance on one before the shift of weight of occurred. Silence permeated the area around her as Asajj stalked her prey, careful to keep her presence not only masked, but the surrounding world as well. Her foot slipped as it sought purchase, sliding to the side and digging into the dead foliage that coated every surface of the world.

Give her the Coruscant undercity any day of the week.

Regaining her balance, she pushed forward, sliding low to the ground as she crept ever closer to her prey. Here, on a remote moon of an outer rim world without so much as a numbered designation, she'd found her quarry. The Alliance had been coached well in the hiding of their refugees and Asajj knew a good deal of that would have come from Padmé.

Much as she was loathe to admit it, her former partner had been meticulous to a fault and knew what she had been doing.

Not unlike herself; except Asajj's skills ran towards the hunt — and the hunt was what occupied her thoughts now. Just over the ridge in front of her lay the modest compound where her prey lay sleeping. A former Jedi Knight, stripped of their identity, with little to nothing to show for the thousands of years of loyal service they'd rendered to the now defunct Republic. Asajj relished the thought.

It was no more than the high handed, righteous, stuck up snobs deserved.

Easing her way carefully to the top of the rise, the Force Adept took in the scene below. Dawn hadn't yet graced this side of the moon and she was well versed to take full advantage of that fact. For the moment, she simply wanted to take stock.

Below her, nestled in a valley boasting both a defensible position and plenty of resources were the huts of the natives. Corralled into a small semi-circular pattern, they were nestled against the sharp drop of the sheer cliff face that Asajj had made her vantage point. As she watched, smoke began to rise from the chimneys of the huts and the strange domesticated animals that cultures seemed to crave from this world began to stir.

Almost directly below her — and over a mile down.

A feral smile broke across her face, a jagged slash of white in the pre-dawn darkness. This was it; she could feel the rightness of this village in her bones. The Force sung like an

operatic singer, sliding through her veins with the muted presence of her quarry and it took a moment to reign in the powerful surge. Already masked, her own presence muted and distorted, Asajj knew it would only be revealed by a concentrated and focused Force check by someone more powerful than she. Vader or the Emperor would be capable, but none of the Jedi she'd yet hunted had discerned her presence before she'd chosen to reveal it.

It was enough to make her confident in her abilities. But until she was able to mask her presence from Vader, she would continue to practice on her enemies. Only when the Dark Lord himself was incapable of knowing when she was about, would she consider the skill mastered. Only then would she even consider seeking her freedom.

Shaking the thoughts away, Asajj took a knee in the same location she'd been occupying for the better part of the last two days and reevaluated what she knew of her prey.

The Jedi had a partner for starters, but what Asajj couldn't determine was if this partner had also been a Jedi. If that was the case, the presence of her target muted and distorted the other. Regardless, the mate would have to go before dispatching her quarry. Preferably in the same strike and preferably soon — the sooner the better. She hated worlds like this one on the best of days, and today not only felt like rain, but smelled of it.

Focusing back on the task at hand, she gauged how far off the dawn truly was with an experienced eye. An hour, maybe a little more. Enough time to reach the forest floor and dispatch the Jedi's mate — but also the Jedi? It was possible. The Jedi seemed to be a heavy sleeper — or at least a late sleeper — and the mate rose early. The only possible problem would be using the Force.

If the mate was indeed a Force user, Asajj would need to permanently silence her as soon as possible.

Considering her options, Asajj stared at the hut she knew housed the Jedi and their mate and came to one startling conclusion. If she used the Force moderately, as she'd been doing since trekking out to his place every day, a descent from these heights would be relatively safe. She'd simply have to watch her steps.

Her eyes narrowing, she stroked the hilt of one of her lightsabers with thoughtful fingers. The mate would be up shortly; dispatching it as it exited the hut would be a simple matter. Once that close, Asajj would be able to clearly read the life force signatures of both the huts occupants and, should the mate prove just to be another useless normal individual, their life would not be missed and her lightsaber wouldn't be necessary to eliminate them.

Shifting into a crouch; her decision made, Asajj carefully studied the walls of the gorge where the village was situated and planned her avenue of attack. Ledges, small caves and places where she'd be able to briefly pause were revealed in the pre-dawn shadows the way they wouldn't be during the day. Checking one last time to ensure the village still slept, Asajj gathered herself, enfolding her force signature about her like a cloak, and jumped.

Landing without mishap, she paused for barely a second to get her breath before launching herself into the air once more. Down and down she went, using the Force to enhance her muscles even as she cloaked her signature, sweat breaking out on her skin as she did. The dual pull was taxing, draining and exhilarating all at the same time. It pushed her to test her skills, to hone them into weapons she could use.

Except at the moment, they were a double edged blade, threatening to escape her grasp and reveal her presence to the Jedi somewhere below.

Landing on one of the ledges about two thirds of the way down the gorge, Asajj took to a knee and paused to catch her breath. Letting the Force bleed slowly from her frame, she maintained only the barest of masking abilities. She drew in deep, gasping breaths as her heart beat slowed back to normal, the adrenaline rush of such power fading as she released her hold by fractions.

Focused inwards, Asajj did something she hadn't done since her initiation to her abilities as a Force Adept; she lost track of time

Cleansing her body of the residual effects of the Force enhancements and regaining full control took longer than she expected and the sky was starting to lighten somewhere in the distance, false dawn threatening to give way to the real thing, when she opened her eyes once more. Shock drove her to her feet as she realized she was running out of time.

Looking down, she judged the distance — and stepped off the precipice where she stood.

Still cloaked in the Force suppression, she drew on her powers at the last possible second before striking the ground and rolled, absorbing and dissipating the impact. Or rather, that's what she attempted to do. Hitting the ground with far more force than she expected, burning pain shot up her arm and through her shoulders as she rolled and slid to a stop.

Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to sit up and look around — to ignore the agony that spread from shoulder to collar bone — and take stock of her situation. Her fall and landing, after several tense moments of observation, appeared to have gone unnoticed.

Only once she'd ascertained that she was still undetected, did Asajj look at her arm. Her shoulder and elbow had been dislocated by the impact with the ground. Gritting her teeth, she pushed to her feet, the humiliating injury fueling the fires of her rage and bringing the world into focus. Drawing on it as a source of power, she didn't bother to fix it; there wasn't any point until she'd finished her task and gotten away. No matter her stoic control, she would make some kind of sound when she reset them into their proper location — thus the time wasn't now.

Easing her way around the camp, Asajj snuck in behind the hut where she knew her quarry slept. Listening with every few steps, she eased into position. Lightsabers wouldn't serve her in this instance — not initially anyway — and so she used the skills honed over years of infiltrations. Silent as a shadow, one arm hanging uselessly by her side, she gauged each step, stalking her prey in a fashion that she hadn't used in many years.

As she did, the memory and physical imprint of the how resurfaced. Her body eased into the familiar rhythms even as her mind thrilled at the idea of using traditional methods, with a little Force assist, in taking down this prey. Pitting herself against the Jedi and its mate were almost a worthy challenge. If they hadn't been so contemptible, they would be.

Sliding closer, she eased around towards the main door of the hut, ever alert for signs of movement or life in the camp. Well aware that it would take very little to destroy the camp before the Jedi reacted, she nonetheless restrained herself. Her quarrel wasn't with people who'd been deceived to believe that Jedi were good and honorable; it was with the Jedi

themselves. Once she'd eliminated the threat to their existence, these people could go back to their lives and she would continue with hers.

The camp was not her enemy.

Keeping that firmly in mind, Asajj inhaled deeply and braced herself for what she knew was coming next. A quick look around showed no activity as of yet, and a flick of her good wrist opened the flap to the hall the Jedi and its mate shared. Ducking inside, she held herself still for a long moment as her eyes adjusted to the dim interior. In the center was a primitive fire pit, the embers of a fire — banked for the night — and still smoldering kept the hut warm. No furniture marked the inside, but Asajj wasn't that surprised; her prey were from a fairly primitive culture and returning to those roots was less likely to draw attention to themselves.

A snort to her right drew her attention. Stepping towards it cautiously, Asajj eased open the skin that made the makeshift wall. A large pallet before her held both individuals, their pelts visible above the blanket that covered them both. This close, there was no mistaking her prey; only one of the individuals exhibited a Force signature — muted even in repose — but unmistakable. Easing closer, Asajj stepped between the wall of the hut and the pallet, her lips curling in a sneer of contempt. This Jedi would never wake to see another day.

Easing one of her lightsabers from her belt, she glanced across as the Jedi's mate began to stir.

Discovery would likely mean the end of Asajj — injured as she was, there was little doubt that the Jedi's mate would tear her limb from limb if given the opportunity. Clenching the fingers of her injured arm, she lifted it with a wince even as she channeled the pain into the Force. The mate made a sound of distress, glazed eyes opening as it fought against the Force's hold on its windpipe for breath. Thrashing, one hairy arm lashed out, catching the Jedi on the side. Ready for such an occurrence, Asajj dropped her Force cloak, lifting her lightsaber as she did.

The Jedi's eyes flashed open and locked on hers for a split second, recognition deep within their depths — and Asajj struck. There was no time and no room for the Jedi to maneuver as her blade arched in — and she read it in the depths of its orbs. That didn't stop it from reaching towards the edge of the pallet and the blade Asajj suspected was hidden underneath.

The furred head went flying as the lightsaber sliced through sinew and bone with ease. Turning the blade back, Asajj put its mate out of its misery before the lightsaber snapped off just as quickly as it had come on. Leaving them where they'd fallen, Asajj knelt and retrieved the blade the Jedi had attempted, even in its last moments, to retrieve. Tucking it into her belt, she stepped from the chamber of death back into the common room before easing the flap to the main door open and looking around.

Nothing stirred.

The Jedi and its mate had made no sound in death, and the hum of her lightsaber wouldn't have carried beyond the walls. In the clear, Asajj slipped from the hut. Without worry of detection from a Force user, she didn't mask her presence as she called on it to enhance her speed and strength. Focused, her attention no longer split, getting back to the top of the ravine

was far easier than getting down it — a skill she'd have to practice later — and she landed at her vantage point barely thirty minutes after she'd left it.

Her mission accomplished, Asajj knelt on the edge of the ravine and surveyed the floor below her. Everything *seemed* as calm as the last time she'd examined it — but she knew better. Where there had once been a Jedi, there now lay a corpse. A smile crossed her lips before her gaze shifted to the arm that was hanging uselessly at her side, the throbbing from the injury beginning to penetrate her sense of triumph.

Tilting her head, her lips curled with a sneer of contempt; Asajj silently saluted the village and turned her back on it. She had an arm to set and a next set of coordinates to reach; with any luck, she'd have another trophy or two to add to her collection before contacting Vader. Focusing for the moment on getting back to the relative safety of her ship and seeing to her injury, Asajj was already reviewing what she'd done wrong and preparing for the next time.

The more tricks she had up her sleeve, the more dangerous she became — and the closer she came to a time when she'd be powerful enough to escape Vader's control.

Month Twenty Four, Day 6 PEF

Chapter 35

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Six PEF

Another day of frustration had resulted in Vader spending yet another night alone in his bed and there'd been hell to pay upon their first encounter after they'd awoken for the day. Vader had been irritable — sleeping without covers was a little too cool even in the temperature controlled ship — and Padmé had been spitting mad.

She'd railed at him about his underhanded, high-handed arrogance at thinking he could make her decisions for her; for having the *gall* to carry her to his bed when at her move vulnerable. Vader hadn't regretted it — how could he when it had resulted in being able to fall asleep with her in his arms after so long an absence? Unfortunately, Padmé hadn't seen it his way and her stratagem continued throughout the day and into another night, leaving Vader at a loss on how to approach her without setting off her temper.

In the end, he'd given her a day of silence and solitude, retiring without harassing or baiting her; despite having fallen asleep with her in his arms the night previous, he hadn't slept well. A night of uninterrupted slumber knowing she was safely in his chambers — if not in his bed — would be enough.

And undisturbed it had been; Padmé, he well knew, was incapable of doing him serious or permanent harm. Waking from that sleep, however, was not in the fashion he'd hoped...

Beep.

Beep.

With a groan, Vader rolled towards the sound, his hand shooting out towards the night table to search for it. His chrono hit the ground with a clatter along with his comlink, forcing him to reluctantly open his eyes. The red numbers of the time on the chrono flared briefly before his gaze — but long enough for him to realize it was still early morning; too early. Pulling himself forward, he reached over the side of the bed as the sound that had woken him made itself known again.

Beep.

Beep.

Unwilling to pull himself to the edge, Vader reached out and *pulled* the comlink he couldn't see, but knew was there, into his hand. It flew up almost immediately as his head dropped back to the pillow. Without looking, he flipped it on. "This has best be important."

"M-my Lord," the voice of the General was slightly harassed. "The Emperor demands we make contact."

Vader's eyes shot open and he was throwing his legs over the side barely a moment later, comlink still in hand. "Drop us out of Hyperspace safely so we can get a clear transmission, General. I will be there shortly."

"Yes, my Lord."

Tossing the comlink back towards his bed, Vader cursed silently and fluently in the languages he knew even as he hastily dressed. It took two minutes to don shirt, boots, socks and breeches before he collected his gloves and exited his bed chamber. Padmé was visible sitting on the couch, and he knew she heard his door open, but she didn't bother to glance in his direction. It suited him; he had no desire to fight with her at that moment. If he did, his Master was sure to pick up on his turmoil.

Sliding on his gloves, he headed for the door without bidding her his normal good morning. Depending on what his Master needed, her circumstances might be changing. Idly, Vader tightened the straps on the glove around his right forearm and hand, ruthlessly forcing his wife from his thoughts and focusing instead on the interview that would happen in bare moments.

The feeling of the ship dropping from hyperspace as he crossed the threshold out of his quarters, leaving his wife behind, has his apprehension rising. The Emperor didn't order contact unless something of importance occurred; or he saw something through the Force that Vader needed to be aware of. Without a word to anyone, he hastily strode towards the communication's bay that his Master required during all of their contact; a complete hologram, with Vader on one knee in subservient obedience was necessary — and it chafed despite his choice in making the man his Master.

Regardless, he focused now on keeping his thoughts and expressions clear. If Palpatine knew of Padmé's presence, her life would be forfeit — and that was something Vader would *never* allow.

Back in Vader's chambers, Padmé stared in silent amazement at the door through which he had exited; he hadn't so much as looked her way with a kind word. From the corner of her eye she'd seen the look on his face, a focused and grim thing that she was very familiar with. It was the same look Anakin had worn whenever he'd been called to report to Obi-Wan.

Wherever he was going, it was obvious he wasn't pleased about it — and that he had no time for her that morning. Which was just as well, she told herself silently. She didn't want his attention anyway; didn't need it. Certainly not after being woken by the horrible beeping from his chambers just minutes before; it served as a way of being snapped from one of her nightmares.

She was shaking, resonating from the echo of emotional backlash — and Vader hadn't noticed. Mercifully left to her own devices and still struggling with the revelations of the last several days, Padmé rose shakily to her feet. She could hear the echoes of her children's cries as if they were there, making her stomach roil. A half-sprint, half-stumbled run to the 'fresher was barely accomplished in time before she felt she would be ill.

Thankfully, it was a feeling that didn't result in actual physical manifestation, but it did nothing to help her nerves. And nothing, she realized, for her frame of mind. Disjointed as her thoughts were, she couldn't help but wonder how much worse things were going to get. If the nightmares were this bad now, could they get worse?

The answer, to her way of thinking, was that they could *always* get worse — and always did the closer they got to Empire Day; the closer they got to the twin's birthday. Hot on the heels of that thought was the number of days — twenty four days until Empire Day and their birthday. She stumbled, feeling the weakness that often accompanied a rough nightmare spreading through her system, and grasped a nearby wall for support.

Max!

The thought came unbidden as she closed her eyes and pressed her forehead against the vertical surface. Tears stung her eyes and her body shook with further tremors as she struggled to fight free of the darkness and pain threatening to engulf her once more. If Max were there, he could help — would know how to banish the residual darkness eating away at her and give her the chance to focus on what needed to be done.

But Max wasn't there; nobody was — and she was alone, as always, to face the nightmares... as she had been for the last week.

Week.

A full seven days since she'd been captured and made Vader's prisoner — but it felt like a lifetime. A lifetime in which she'd been exposed to more pain and suffering than since she'd had her children taken and her so-called friends refuse to surrender them to her. A week in which time she'd lost what little remained of her freedoms and slowly begun a downward spiral into despair from which she knew there would be little escape.

Determined not to succumb, no matter how bad things looked, Padmé pushed away from the wall and made her way to the kitchenette. Focused inwards, she disregarded the near violent shaking of her hands and set about making some tea; Vader kept a selection — which surprised her but shouldn't have — and one of them was a soothing concoction that was supposed to ease the nerves.

Without any other recourse or option, she boiled the water necessary for the tea. Unless she calmed down, Vader would find her easy prey and she wouldn't — couldn't! — turn to him for any kind of comfort. Especially not the kind he seemed inclined to offer. No matter how much... solace she'd find in his bed, that was *not* an option. The fact she had to remind herself of it as the water boiled and she immediately filled the mug she'd prepared, was yet another sign of her frame of mind.

Closing her eyes, Padmé sagged against the counter with both hands around the mug. Without looking, she lifted the glass and inhaled deeply, feeling the first stirrings of calm begin to enter her system with the pungent, but not unpleasant, steam. Unable to summon a smile of appreciation, she simply lifted the mug to her lips.

"There you—" *crash!* "—are."

Padmé's eyes flew open, one hand grasping the counter at her back for a weapon, the other flying to her throat in surprise. The mug, which had been securely planted in her hands before

Vader's intrusion, had shattered on the ground at her bare feet, soaking the hem of her slacks and splattering his with liquid. It was hot, burning, but that pain was nothing next to the whirlwind within.

"Padmé? Are you okay?"

"No." The word came out short, defensive and an echo of what she'd woke up to. Her fingers tightened on the counter, the fist at her throat squeezing until her knuckles were white. "I'll never be okay again — and it's all your fault!"

"I'm not responsible for your—"

"You *are*!" She snapped, lashing out in an attempt to make him hurt as much as she hurt inside — and knowing it didn't prevent her from trying. "If it hadn't been for you none of this would have happened! My children would be safe, with me, instead of who knows where!"

"You're right." While his response was lethally calm, his anger was evident in the glint in his gaze. "Without me none of this would have happened. You would never have gotten off Tatooine in time to warn the Senate; instead you'd be moldering in chains to some Hutt with a taste for expensive flesh."

"Master Jinn would never have allowed it!"

"Even when you began to starve?" His eyes narrowed. "You were old enough to be sold as a pleasure slave and young enough to draw a higher bid than most — who wouldn't have wanted a Queen at their beck and call?"

His words were a verbal slap, designed to bring her to her senses. "If we'd never brought you with us—"

"Would you have enjoyed being executed at the hands of the assassins Gunray sent for you? Or worse, becoming his prisoner, prey to all his whims? I would never have become what I am without you and you wouldn't be here at the moment without me because you would be dead. Our fates have been intertwined from the start."

"No, I—"

"No?" He glared at her. "Without me, you'd never have made it off Tatooine. Without me, you would never have disabled the droid control ship above Naboo. Without me, Naboo would be chains, it's people enslaved and scattered to the winds; without me Gunray would have succeeded in killing you on more than one occasion; *Without me, our children wouldn't exist!*"

Ignoring the lethally directed jab as it sank home, she swept past him and refused to rise to his bait. "Just leave me alone!"

Behind her, Vader swore as he ran his hands over his head in frustration. There was no reasoning with her — and yet, with his conversation with the Emperor finished, he could now feel the echoes of the pain she'd been in earlier that morning before his return. Striding after her, he was unsurprised to find her in the living room — but he was a little surprised to see she was in the middle of wiping down her feet and putting on socks and boots.

"You're not going anywhere, Padmé."

“Anywhere would be better than here.”

“Would my absence be more to your liking?”

“It’s unlikely you’d provide it.”

“Not willingly.” He smiled humorlessly. “I’ve been recalled to Coruscant.”

“You’re not taking me with you.”

“I don’t dare it; the price would be your life — and it’s not one I’m inclined to pay... even to my Master.”

Her lips curved into a hard, nasty smile. “The Master calls and the trained *chutta* comes running.”

Vader’s posture turned rigid and he bent forward to grasp the back of the couch. “You think you know everything, don’t you, Padmé? You have everything worked out; all of your worries and cares rest solidly on me, but you don’t take into account your own actions. The woman who was mentored by and adored the very man who is now in power is somewhere buried within you. It chafes, doesn’t it — knowing you had a part in his rise to power?”

She whirled, the laces left untied as she gained her feet to glare at him. “Lamentable as my part was, it’s *nothing* compared to yours! As much as you claim to be my husband, you’re nothing but a pretender — a man who follows the dictates of others because he’s too frightened to face those of his own conscience! If this is who you really are, I never knew you at all!”

“One could say the same for you.” Scathingly, his gaze took in her appearance and posture. “If this is the real you, I prefer the fabricated cover you wore for so long!”

“Then let me go.”

“Never.”

“With your blind infatuation, I’m surprised you could see anything beyond the way I looked — the way *you* thought I should look!” her hands fisted at her side. With the way she was feeling, it was good to find an outlet for the frustration and pain threatening to overwhelm her. Vader provided her with the perfect target. “Haven’t you ever heard the saying ‘beauty is only skin deep’?”

“Is that what you think?” Staring at her with stunned incredulity, Vader shook his head. “That I was dazzled by a pretty face — yours? Beautiful though you may be, my love, it was more than just your face that drew me; it was your spirit. That spirit exhibited itself throughout our courtship and marriage. If this is what that spirit masked, then I didn’t know you at all!”

“You were never around,” she sneered coldly, crossing her arms defensively over her chest. “Even then you were too busy trying to get into my bed rather than take the time to get to know me.”

Regarding her for a long moment, as if seeing her — *really* seeing her — for the first time since her capture, Vader seemed to be trying to analyze her. She stared back at him defiantly,

refusing to shrink from that penetrating gaze. Let him look and see for himself; it was no more than he deserved.

“You’ve changed, Padmé.”

“How good of you to notice.”

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“Yet one more thing that’s your fault,” turning on one heel, she spoke disdainfully over her shoulder. “Enjoy your trip — I’ll certainly enjoy my solitude.”

Ah yes, his real reason for following her. His lips twisted. “For several days at any rate. I leave in two.”

She made no move to indicate she’d heard him, continuing towards the viewport furthest from him. His anger simmering, Vader stared at her. She’d been trying to hurt him — he’d *felt* it; she’d succeeded admirably. The idea that he hadn’t known her, or had wanted her for her beauty alone was ridiculous and insulting — and she’d meant it as such. The worst part was that it *had* hurt, almost as much as her claim to have never known him.

Whirling, he turned away and stalked out of their quarters. He’d said his piece, informed her of his upcoming absence — and now he had to set things to right before leaving. Asajj needed to be issued further instructions, the Generals in his fleet needed new targets and battle plans, his fighter needed an overhaul of the flight and targeting systems and Artoo needed to be given his annual maintenance.

The last, while therapeutic, was not something he was inclined to undertake while simmering. He knew better than to chance permanent damage to his friend. No, for now he’d focus on his fleet and their upcoming objectives — and expect perfection. The lack of it would give him the outlet he needed to curb his fury and bring things back into perspective.

In his quarters, Padmé stared blindly out the viewport, not seeing the star lines as the ship re-entered hyperspace, thinking about the brief argument she and Vader had just had. One point stood out for her in painful clarity and reverberated through her mind. No matter that they’d fought about it days before — no matter that she’d tried to distance herself from it, it was unavoidable.

“Without me, our children wouldn’t exist!”

Echoing through her thoughts and pushing against the barriers she’d held around her heart for the last two years was the base truth in that reality. As much as she denied it, as much as she didn’t wish it to be so, Vader’s words rang true. In the basest, more genetic sense of the words... he was right. It stung, sliding between her ribs like the point of a stiletto blade and aimed for the heart.

She could deny the truth before her as much as she wished, but the very real fact of the matter was inescapable. Vader had once been Anakin Skywalker, who was the father of her children. Without him, no matter which name he chose to wear, her children wouldn’t exist — their mother would have died long before their conception. She’d inadvertently and accidentally acknowledged him as the twin’s father before, but this... this was something she couldn’t ignore — something she couldn’t escape.

Beneath what he was now, lay the man who'd loved and cherished her. Forgotten, buried, and smothered until he was but a shadow lurking in the eyes of a monster.

That reality mingled with the fact that her children were beyond her grasp. How was she to reconcile one fact with the other? She couldn't and it shredded the last of the resolve holding the tears inside. Closing her eyes, she pressed her forehead against the viewport as they silently slid down her cheeks.

Later that evening, long hours after Vader had retired, Padmé stood alone in his living room, staring at the doorway through which he lay. Unbidden, her feet began to move, taking her towards the portal. She'd discarded her shoes hours ago — about the same time he'd retired — and her bare feet sank into the luxurious carpet soundlessly.

His words continued to echo in her head, drawing her towards his bedchamber.

The result of their discussion, if one could call it that, had led to an afternoon and evening of reflection on both her captor and her circumstances. She couldn't ignore the fact that Vader *had been* Anakin; not anymore. No matter how hard she tried, the similarities were there, too deep to deny.

Stopping in the entrance of his bedchamber, she lifted one hand to grasp the door frame.

Her gaze lingered on his face, devoid of the hard edges they carried during his waking hours — and in that visage she could see the echoes of the man she'd once loved; the man who *had* fathered her children. His breath rose and fell in an even cadence of untroubled sleep that she envied; she couldn't remember what it felt like not to fear sleep. Still, her gaze traced his form under the covers.

As if sensing her regard, Vader rolled and the sheet slipped away from the naked expanse of his chest as he flung one arm out towards the door, his head turned in her direction. As he settled, his hair fell across his brow in tempting disarray and, watching him unobserved, Padmé couldn't find the will to look away. Her finger itched to brush his hair back, to run her fingers through the silky waves she remembered... and she clenched them tightly around the frame.

He was a temptation she could do without, a distraction on her way to locating her children — and yet he was also the one, insurmountable obstacle she couldn't yet overcome to continue her search. Vader's determination to keep her there beside him — safe he had called it — was reminiscent of Anakin's reluctance to see her involved in anything that might bring further death threats her way.

Not that it had stopped her.

And she couldn't let it stop her now. While she was his prisoner, captive in every sense of the word despite the gilded cage, she was powerless to affect any kind of change with regards to her circumstance.

With Vader's sleeping form before her, the last week threading through her mind, she reflected on the steps that had brought them to now. Anakin, her knight in shining armor, had fallen — but why? He'd been so good, despite the darkness held tightly leashed within him. It

had been mind boggling and painful to see his fall. Not only to see it, but to know it had been a willing and pursued path.

Easing forward, she stepped further into the room, her gaze locked on his face for signs of waking. The moment he twitched, or his breathing changed, she vowed to be across the room and beyond his gaze before he could inhale his next breath. But he didn't stir; his breathing remained the same. Drawn by something she couldn't quite explain, Padmé stopped by the edge of his bed.

Beside her, face up with the fingers curling slightly inwards, was the replacement to the mechanical hand she remembered Anakin working so diligently on. He'd been so determined to have two hands for their wedding night; two hands to touch and caress her with — two hands to show he wasn't any less of a man for his failures. Not that she'd ever considered it. Not even when he'd come home scarred, or had to rebuild the hand into the one she now touched — or when he'd fallen on Tatooine after the death of his mother.

Of its own accord, her hand stretched out to brush across the length of the index finger which was slightly curled in towards the palm.

Despite everything they'd been through, or perhaps because of it, she'd always seen him as more than he could see himself. He'd seen something lacking — she'd seen the hero who gave his all and asked little in return. He'd seen a Padawan elevated by grudging Masters — she'd seen a Knight who'd not only proved himself time and time again, but one who far outmatched any other Jedi.

Where had they gone so wrong?

“What happened to you, Anakin?”

Her choked, whispered query seemed to act as a trigger and his hand moved, curling about hers and entwining their fingers in a move that was so achingly familiar she froze. Her gaze jumped back to his face as she strained to make out any signs that he was awake. Holding her breath, she listened.

A few tense moments passed before she exhaled; Vader hadn't moved further. His lashes remained fanned against his cheekbones, his hair remained across his brow and his breathing hadn't shifted — if anything, it had gotten deeper. It was as if her touch had allowed him to slip into a deeper, more contented sleep.

Resenting the fact that he could find comfort in her touch when she was denied any, she shifted her hand. His fingers squeezed and then relaxed, allowing her to gently extract her own. Shooting him a look to ensure he was still sleeping, she hurriedly departed his bed chamber, rubbing her hand against her slacks as she did. Retreating to the couch and her lonely vigil, Padmé resumed watching the slide of the star lines as the ship continued through hyperspace.

Somewhere, someone was watching out for her — for the following morning Vader made no mention of her impromptu visit or her question and seemed completely unaware that she'd been in his room at all. For that, if nothing else, Padmé was grateful. The last thing she needed, or wanted, was Vader holding anymore of her lapses in judgment above her head.

Month Twenty Four, Day 7 PEF, morning

Chapter 36

Vader's Flag Ship Exactor — Month Twenty Four, Day Seven PEF

After a morning spent in silent reflection as Padmé fought with herself about the lie she'd told Artoo in Vader's presence, she picked at her lunch — a lunch Artoo had made for her. The little droid had been into the suite earlier that morning to spend some more time with her and each time she saw him, the guilt ate away at her a little more. He was a reminder that she wasn't the only one mourning their other half — for Threepio was indeed Artoo's counterpart just as Anakin had been hers.

The only difference was that she could do something about Artoo's grief and none about her own.

On top of it all, she found she missed the prissy, uptight golden droid. His constant companionship over the years had been one staple, one comfort, while Anakin had been away. He'd known to be discreet about their relationship, in his own fashion, but he'd also served as her closest confidant whenever Anakin and Artoo were off world.

Day by day, Vader's presence and actions only served to reaffirm that he was no longer Anakin. Anakin, she knew, would never have kept her cooped up in such a small space for extended periods of time — he'd understood how much her freedom meant to her. He would never have kept her a virtual prisoner, denied her the means of continuing her search or... argued with her quite so much.

Artoo nudged her; tootling a question and she absently patted his dome. "I'm okay, Artoo. Just tired."

He bleeped an admonition and she smiled faintly, not needing to consult the screen to know what it said; it was the same noise he'd been hassling her with just about every time he'd seen her. Perhaps giving him Threepio to focus on as a topic would take his concern away from her — Force knew it would give Vader something else to focus on and maybe, just maybe, divert his attention away from the twins long enough to keep him off their trail.

"Is the salad not to your liking?"

Flinching, she lifted her head to meet Vader's gaze even as she let go of the fork she'd been using to push the greens around her plate. "Not particularly." She saw him frown as she averted her gaze, not yet ready to deal with him after her early morning sojourn into his quarters and the blow his words had given her stance.

With one hand, Vader whisked her plate away and to the counter top even as he settled across from her. "You need to eat something, Padmé. You've eaten little since you came on board."

His gentle admonishment, laced with concern, reminded her all too much of the golden protocol droid she'd left behind. Sure, Threepio was fussy and precise, but that was also part of his charm. Artoo's toodled agreement did little to diminish the similarity. Abruptly, her decision was made; Artoo deserved to have his friend back — and Vader already knew about Max.

With Max's less than cordial relationship with the protocol droid, she didn't doubt the slicer would drop him if necessary — in fact, she suspected he probably had already. Threepio would be a liability for Max when he went looking for his next job.

"Threepio's alive."

"Don't try t— what?"

Shifting her gaze back to Vader's, Padmé smiled faintly. "Threepio — he's alive."

"Alive."

"That's what I said. I didn't have him melted down for scrap."

Artoo whistled a query and Vader, his gaze never leaving hers, voiced his agreement. "That's what I want to know too, Artoo. Why did you say otherwise?"

"I wanted you to feel the kind of loss I do — but that's not fair to Artoo. They're friends, counterparts... and they shouldn't suffer just because I want to make *you* hurt."

Artoo let out an excited whistle, rotating his dome and spinning in an excited circle. Whatever his chirps and bleeps were saying, she didn't know. Vader, on the other hand, was shaking his head. "No, Artoo, we can't go searching for him."

The indignant 'Why Not' in Artoo's next question was unmistakable.

"Because I've been called to Coruscant; it'll have to wait until I get back."

Padmé reached out to pat Artoo's dome. "I have a... transponder signal he might still be sending, Artoo. You'll need to modify some sensors to track it but it'll probably take until he gets back."

Artoo slid open a datapad for her and Padmé punched it in after a moment's hesitation, realizing she might be leading Vader directly to Max — and praying the slicer's dislike for the droid had encouraged him to abandon the protocol droid on some remote outpost no matter Padmé's tie to him. Max had always been practical; she had no reason to think he wouldn't ditch the droid as soon as he could.

With an excited shriek, Artoo quit the room, leaving Vader and Padmé alone — and Padmé intensely aware of Vader's observant gaze.

He rose to his feet, giving her a brief reprieve, and headed for the counter where the food was still laid out. His back blocking her view, his gaze on his task, he spoke to her over his shoulder. "If you're thinking to win Artoo's loyalty it will take more than returning Threepio to his side to bring him around."

"Meaning he's already been corrupted by your influence."

“Meaning he’s been with me for a long time just as Threepio’s been with you. He has, hasn’t he?”

“Ever since you gave him into my keeping.”

“Considering how much you *claim* to hate me, I’m surprised you kept him after Mustafar.”

Padmé was silent, refusing to say just exactly why she’d kept the droid. Vader didn’t appear to mind as he continued, turning with two plates in hand — one which was promptly set in front of her, the other before his chair. “Eat something.”

“I’m not hungry,” which was the truth — she couldn’t eat for the knots in her stomach. “I’m not a child to be fed when you think.”

“No, you’re a woman who won’t live to see her children again if you keep refusing to nourish your body. I told you I have no desire to see you dead and if I have to restrain you to get you mounted to a nutrient drip I will. Eat.”

Padmé had no desire to die — not before her children were found and she had the chance to hold them. It was that thought alone that had her taking up her fork once more; if it happened to coincide with Vader’s current agenda, it couldn’t be helped. It wasn’t that she agreed with him, she told herself silently, she just had no wish to undergo the indignity of what he threatened.

Fortunately, Vader did little more than nod — as if unsurprised by her actions — and directed the conversation back on course. “Was it Threepio that helped nurse you back to health after your coma?”

Padmé nodded, taking a small bite of the meat he’d placed on her plate. “Partially, I think. He had little to do but take care of me — they were his last instructions after all.”

“He did a good job.”

“Not good enough.” The look she sent his way was laced with ire. “If he’d been out and about, he could have kept track of the twins and who took them.”

“Then he would know the identities of the Alliance traitors.”

“I doubt it,” she told him dryly. “Threepio didn’t spend any time away from me, or so I was told — and whenever one of them did come into the room, he was in his recharge cycles. A... precaution in case he was captured before they could memory wipe him. They were able to partially wipe him before we left so whatever you’re looking for, you won’t find it in Threepio’s memory banks.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Vader took another bite, nodding to the idle fork in her hand that she should do the same. “Was he with you before the coma?”

“You mean when the twins were born?”

Vader nodded.

“He was,” she admitted softly, her fingers tightening on the fork.

“Did he hold your hand since I could not?”

“No.” Padmé carefully placed the fork down before she dropped it. “Obi-Wan did.”

“Kenobi?” Vader’s fork paused half way to his mouth before his lips twisted and it continued on its way. “That’s impossible. You must have imagined it.”

Underlying his words were the one he didn’t say, the question he didn’t ask; why she’d imagine his *mentor* instead of her *husband*? But Padmé knew she hadn’t imagined anything — what Vader had seen hadn’t been real. Obi-Wan *had* been holding her hand; Obi-Wan had held their *children* when she could not. Her disbelief must have shown in her expression for Vader expounded on his previous statement.

“He’s dead, Padmé; Obi-Wan died on Mustafar.”

“No, he didn’t.”

“He did.” There was a certainty in Vader’s voice that surprised her. “I saw him die.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. He fell into the molten river; he couldn’t have survived it — not even using all of his Jedi skills.”

“Did he scream?”

“I doubt there was time. We were surprised by a vertical jet of lava; I jumped to another floating rock — he had nowhere to go. There’s no way he could have escaped.”

“And I’m telling you he did.” Heat had entered her tone. “I know what I saw, what I felt — he got to... to hold Luke and Leia because I wasn’t strong enough... he was there when—”

Whatever she’d been about to say was cut off as Vader pushed violently away from the table, seeming to finally register what she was saying. “*Obi-Wan’s alive* — and you didn’t think to say anything until *now*?”

“Why would I?” Pushing up to face him at less of a disadvantage, their lunch was forgotten. “I thought you knew; he was your Master, your mentor — I figured you’d know if he was alive!”

Vader swore savagely. “This changes things.”

“How? Obi-Wan may be the only person alive who knows where my children are!”

“Next you’ll be telling me you were looking for him.”

“Is that so hard to believe?” Her demand was scathing, but brittle underneath as she spoke of what little she remembered. “His face is the last clear memory I have before I fell into my coma; he was there when they were born — he probably knows who took them and where.”

That stung. Unintentionally perhaps, but Vader felt it cleanly — like the blade that had severed his arm so many years ago, and it aimed for the heart. Obi-Wan had watched their children being born, held Padmé’s hand — a position he himself had expected to fill — and maybe been party to the plot to deny her their children? Unacceptable!

“You *are* searching for him.”

“Was searching — for all the good it did me,” her words were bitter. “Why do you think I was helping the Jedi? Yes, it kept them out of your grasp, but there was a chance — a *small chance* — one of them would know where he was. How could I pass that up? Their safety was a small price to pay if it meant getting my children back.”

“Rather than turn to me for help.”

“Why the hell would I turn to you for help? You’re the last person I want to have find them. I know Obi-Wan wouldn’t turn them over to a Master bent on bending them to his will and twisting them to evil.”

“No, he’d simply indoctrinate them with the Jedi’s pacifist ways,” Vader sneered. “The Jedi are dead, Padmé — they simply don’t know it yet.”

“You’re wrong. Obi-Wan will—”

“Will what? Rescue you? Come charging in like the Knight he swore to be? Your protector is right here, Padmé. Every rescue operation ever undertaken for you was spearheaded by *me* — often *against* Obi-Wan’s recommendations. Obi-Wan can’t help you now. Not to be free of me; not against the Emperor and certainly *not* in finding our children!”

Without another word, Vader stalked from the kitchenette and headed for his office, leaving Padmé staring after him in silent dismay.

Wrapping her arms about herself, she sank back down to the chair she’d been using but had no appetite to continue on the mound of food Vader had left for her. She hadn’t known; if she had, she *might* have avoided using Obi-Wan’s name. Anakin’s old Master didn’t deserve to have Vader on his tail and she would now bear the guilt of knowing she’d been the one to enlighten Vader to his continued existence.

Vader locked his office door behind him as he flipped open the comm. unit and punched in the coded signal for Asajj’s fighter. The call was listed as a priority and she’d receive it next she checked in with her ship.

Disgusted, hurt, he began to pace the length of his office as he considered what Padmé had revealed. The victory he’d claimed over his former Master had, in fact, been nothing more than a ruse — and a painful one at that. Obi-Wan shouldn’t have been able to escape from that venting — he should have died quickly, incinerated with the rock on which he’d stood in seconds.

Instead, Obi-Wan had lived, followed Padmé and likely been the one to take her to the Alliance sympathizers — there was no other reasonable explanation as to why she’d have been taken to them with Threepio at the helm. Thus, by proxy, it was Obi-Wan’s fault that Padmé had been in the Alliance sympathizer’s hands when she’d given birth to his children; it was Obi-Wan’s fault that they’d been taken from her — Obi-Wan’s fault she’d been taken from *him*.

All sins for which his former Master would pay.

Inhaling deeply, Vader lashed out at one of the pieces of artwork in his study and it shattered under the force of his anger. Now curbed, he let the emotion ebb and simmer until a

time where he would truly need it. Unnoticed, a cleaning droid appeared to sweep up the mess. Instead, Vader's thoughts turned to the rest of the conversation he'd had with Padmé.

Threepio.

His protocol droid was still out there somewhere, waiting for be returned to him. His lips curled. Not for a minute did he believe that Padmé had supplied Artoo with a valid and working frequency for finding the droid. Whatever she'd supplied would be something to keep him occupied. Threepio was likely still with whatever and whomever remained of her little group.

His lips pulled into a frown. Had she left Threepio with this Max character? A slicer with a droid wasn't unheard of, and Threepio — as annoying as he could be — would have been an asset to someone with Max's vaunted skills. His gut burned with jealous anger at the thought. Threepio had been his gift to Padmé, something he could give her that wouldn't raise eyebrows and something that had been just for them. But then, he'd never expected to hear another man's name fall from his wife's lips in a moment of disorientation either — colleague or no.

The comm. channel beeped, distracting him from his thoughts, and bringing him around towards his desk. Two strides brought him into reach as he slapped his hand over the controls. Asajj's image sprang to life.

"Master."

"You're more prompt than usual, Ventress."

"Unintentionally, I assure you."

"No doubt." He straightened abruptly, coming straight to the point. "I have another assignment for you."

Her eyebrows rose. "*Hidden Jedi, the identity of the Alliance traitors and Max... whom else am I to add to this ever expanding list?*"

"Obi-Wan Kenobi."

Asajj's eyes widened in surprise and then narrowed again with malice. Her response was tinged with excitement and caution, and — as a result — came out as more of a statement than a question. "*Obi-Wan.*"

"I want him found; the sooner the better."

"*He will no doubt prove to be as slippery a foe as always — well hidden and elusive.*"

"Beyond your talents?"

"Never." Her tone was sharp, and Vader knew he'd struck a nerve. "*But he is not someone I expected to need to hunt.*"

Neither had Vader, but she didn't need to be told that. "He will be harder to track than the other Jedi I've sent you in search of — but observe and report only; do not engage."

Her expression was mutinous. "*I can handle—*"

“Observe and report,” he snapped, leaning in towards her image. “Every other Jedi you track you can kill, but Obi-Wan is *mine*.”

Asajj was surprisingly silent and Vader understood that he would have to keep a close eye on her or lose his prize. Given the chance, Asajj would disobey him to go after Obi-Wan on her own. And while he knew she was no match for his old Master, Vader also knew that her loss would put a dent in his plans. For the moment he needed her there and under control, doing the tasks the Emperor had set him that he couldn’t do at the moment because of his wife’s presence.

“There is one last thing.”

“*Just one?*”

The look he shot her was sharp as he settled into his chair and lifted his booted feet to the edge of his desk. Regarding her steadily, he left little doubt to the importance of the assignment despite his seemingly nonchalant way he phrased it. “While you’re checking up on the remnants of the little band of terrorists my wife led, keep your eyes out for a protocol droid.”

“*Threepio?*”

Vader arched his eyebrows. So, Asajj knew of the droid — but then, he realized, why wouldn’t she when Padmé had freely admitted the droid was with her through the time Asajj had been her ally? Only at that moment did he see that it would have been strange if she *hadn’t* known about the droid. Contemplating her image, he drummed his fingers on the desk.

“Bring him to me.”

Asajj’s hologram looked ready to inquire why, but seemed to think better of it as she opened her mouth. Instead she firmed her lips into a solid line and inclined her head. “*I will let you know when I have something to report. Ventress out.*”

The image winked away, and Vader pushed out of his chair to pace once more. The wheels of the search set in motion, it was only a matter of time before his old Mentor was run to ground and — when that happened — Vader would be gladly waiting with the executioner’s axe.

However, until Obi-Wan could be brought to justice to pay for his crimes, he had a wife in the next room who persisted in keeping secrets from him. She had information he needed; information he was determined to obtain. Like it or not, until she learned that this situation of hers was permanent — and accepted it — he was simply going to have to rely on her slip ups and unintentional revelations. And after these last ones — Obi-Wan’s survival and having lied about Threepio’s continued existence — Vader found himself oddly reluctant to press for more.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to know what she knew; he simply had no wish to feel the kind of betrayal and hurt the revelation of Obi-Wan’s escape from death had dredged up. They were both feelings he’d sworn he had forgotten; feelings he’d sworn he’d left behind during the slaughter of the Jedi at the Temple — it was disconcerting to realize that they hadn’t been obliterated, just buried.

Feelings he could ill afford.

The need to do something, anything, with his hands — to focus elsewhere on something familiar — reared his head and Vader left his office, heading for the hanger bay.

Month Twenty Four, Day 7 PEF, evening

Chapter 37

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Seven PEF

Padmé was left to her own devices for the rest of the day.

Whatever her discussion with Vader would reveal in the long term was yet to be seen, but the guilt for her revelations continued to eat at her. If anything happened to Obi-Wan because of her, she wasn't sure she'd ever forgive herself. The last thing the Jedi needed was attention being brought to his existence, and she'd betrayed him unknowingly.

She'd honestly thought that Vader had been aware of his continued existence — and let it be. Maybe hope that a part of Anakin was still simmering somewhere in the depths of all that blackness; a hope that he'd spared his Master, perhaps even compromised with him, and they'd left each other on mutual terms since neither could win. Only once had she ever seen Anakin and Obi-Wan cross blades in practice, but it had been enough to convince her that they were equals with the blade.

Equals in skill, but not in experience.

By the time the duel on Mustafar occurred, Padmé would have been hard pressed to select either man as victor; Anakin's inexperience had been tempered over time — time that had been an accelerated teacher. What she hadn't asked herself, was if Obi-Wan would have been willing to allow Vader to live. She'd simply assumed his retreat — or compromise — but that was obviously not what had occurred. But then, if Obi-Wan had wanted Vader dead, why had he not acted? Why hadn't he come forward to challenge and defeat the Sith pretender? Was it simply he'd preferred to remain in anonymity, lost as he was believed to be?

If so, she had no one to blame but herself for Vader's newfound knowledge of Obi-Wan's continued existence.

Would he have gone after Obi-Wan before had he been aware he was alive? Or would he have been too busy, too preoccupied in the formation of the Empire and solidifying its hold? If he'd known Obi-Wan had simply dropped off the map, would he have let it rest — let it slide into obscurity without the circumstances of the twins birth add to it?

She didn't know — and it festered in her mind.

The Anakin she remembered, the man she loved, would *never* have gone after Obi-Wan the way Vader had. Anakin and Obi-Wan had been closer than brothers, tied by a bond that seemed far more binding than blood.

Everything that had occurred this past week weighed heavily on her shoulders; her repeated inability to kill Vader, their arguments, Vader's manipulation of her emotions and the desolation of her loneliness that threatened to send her careening back into her nightmares

and ever awake. All of it heralded a change in her — or at least in her outlook — regarding the man who held her prisoner.

Dinner time came and went, with Vader's absence replaced only by Artoo's excited chatter and inquiries as to Threepio's health. The little chatterbox seemed distracted to the point that he didn't realize she wasn't sharing in his enthusiasm. She was, mercifully, saved from his delight by a call from the hanger bay to bring Artoo back to assist on a modification to Vader's fighter.

It explained where the man was.

Part of her was annoyed he would deprive her of the only company she was allowed outside his own, but in the end she was more grateful to be left to her thoughts. Jumbled as they were, she was concerned over the fact that her opinion of her captor had changed. Living in close quarters — talking, eating and fighting — with him had forced her to evaluate her feelings... or their exact nature.

No matter how badly she wanted to feel something, tried to force herself to feel something, wanting didn't make it happen. She'd tried having discussions with herself — argued the pros and cons of her feelings while he was away. She'd tried to view the situation logically, giving herself every reason why she should and few why she shouldn't. But, no matter how hard she worked at it, the months of denial that had been dedicated to the task amounted to nothing.

Asajj had been right; she didn't hate Vader.

Sagging under the revelation, it left her surprisingly adrift. She'd maintained the illusion of that hate for so long that it had been a crutch, a way to support her flagging spirits and bolster her courage — to give her a purpose beyond finding her children. Without it, she felt weaker; if she didn't hate him, then what did she feel?

Her gaze turned towards his bedchamber for the second night in a row. Vader had retired without a fight, without even one word to her and she had the distinct impression he felt betrayed by her having neglected to mention anything about Obi-Wan. Especially Obi-Wan having been there when the twins were born. He had no right to feel betrayed; she hadn't lied to him. How could she when she'd honestly believed he'd known about Obi-Wan's survival? Considering her predicament and imprisonment, what right did *he* have to feel betrayed at all?

Shaking her head, her gaze focused back where it had landed before her thoughts had stolen her sight — back on Vader's bedchamber. The memory of how he'd been the night before tormented her. In sleep, he was easier to deal with.

She shouldn't.

The voice in the back of her mind was screaming at her not to, asking what kind of will she possessed if she gave in so readily to his physical charms. Except she wasn't. Everything in her, aside from that small voice of reason, was shouting at her to take the comfort and solace from the one source available to her — but she wouldn't. Couldn't.

What she *could* do, however, was look at him.

She hated the weakness that engulfed her when he used her body against her; hated the weakness that made her yearn for his touch — his kiss... and she *did* yearn for it, as much as she was afraid of the vulnerability it revealed. She didn't *want* this confusion and all it entailed and it didn't escape her notice that the weaker she got, the fewer hours she slept, the more susceptible she became. Was this weakness directly tied to her lack of sleep — her inability to rest, knowing the nightmares that awaited her there? It would have been so much easier if was.

Yet, she couldn't stop it.

Confused, exhausted and struggling to hold onto the anger that was her shield against him, she crossed the room to Vader's bedchamber. Emboldened by the fact he hadn't noticed her presence the night before, she stopped in the doorway to look at him.

He was sound asleep, his back to her, the even rise and fall of his chest reassuring in a way nothing else could be. Asleep, he was more like the man she'd loved and lost and it made her heart ache. She clenched one fist against it, staring at him, drinking in the sight of his naked back much the way she'd done the night before. The ache in her chest spiraled outward until it engulfed her entire form and it was all she could do to hold onto the righteous indignation she felt towards him.

Rolling, much as he had the night before, he stretched out across the mattress — except this time he didn't reach for her. His ungloved right hand lay easily across the muscled pectorals of his chest, the sheet lightly trapped between flesh and metal. Breath stuck in her throat as his other arm slid upwards, above his head and he stretched. He said something in his sleep and the faint, almost love-sick smile she well remembered from her dreams crossed his lips. Wanting nothing more than to reach for him, she clenched her hand at her side even as he turned his head away.

No matter what she thought, the man lying on the bed was her Anakin.

Despite the fact that he'd open his eyes and be Vader, everything at rest screamed as to his original identity — an identity lost to them and one that he could never be again. Without thinking she opened her mouth.

"An—"

Hesitating, she struggled with what to call him. This was the man she'd married; he moved the same, slept the same, reached and stretched the same — but *he* wasn't the same. Aside from throwing the accusation in his face that he *wasn't* Anakin anymore, she hadn't dared to call him it to his face — but at rest, the way he was now, he didn't look like Vader. And she wouldn't, *couldn't*, call him Vader when he looked so peaceful. Before she could lose her nerves, she made one those snap decisions she was so famous for.

"Anakin?"

No response.

Her heartbeat throbbed loudly in her ears as she waited to see if he'd reply to her whispered inquiry. A long moment of silence passed, in which Padmé found she was holding her breath.

But nothing happened.

Despite her misgivings and the voice screaming in the back of her mind for her to stop, she tried again.

“...An...Anakin?”

Silence.

There was nothing but the even rise and fall of his chest as he continued to slumber, blissfully unaware of her inner turmoil. Exhaling softly, she searched his posture for signs of wakefulness, wondering if she really *wanted* him to be awake for this.

“I guess it’s best you’re not awake because I don’t know if I could tell you this otherwise. You’d throw it in my face... but then... I would too.”

Pausing, she searched for the words that could put her dilemma into speech... and was distracted by the way his hair touched his cheek. As she stared at the soft strands where they feathered his face, she began to speak without thinking, giving voice to what was in her heart.

“I want so badly to hate you. Hate you for everything you’ve done, all the people you’ve killed, the worlds you’ve destroyed. I’ve lost everything because of you; my life, my marriage, my love, my children, my home... I should hate you for it; hate you more than anything. And I want to.” A slightly strangled laugh caught in her throat as her voice began to quake. “You have no idea how much I want to... But I can’t. No matter how hard I try — *and should* — because it’s what you deserve from me... I can’t do it. I can’t hate you.”

Swallowing against the rise of tears that threatened to choke her, she forced conviction into her voice. “I want to and I can’t.” Stopping for a half second, she looked away from him, struggling for composure, knowing the only place she should direct the emotional rollercoaster of loathing was at herself... but he was also to blame. If he hadn’t turned against everything they’d fought for, her life wouldn’t be in shambles.

“I hate myself for it. Hell, I hate what I’ve become.” Her admission was stark and grim, her composure cracking as she continued. “But I hate myself even more because I can’t hate you. After everything you’ve done, I still can’t do it...I still can’t.”

Him image blurred before her eyes as her throat burned with unshed tears. Spinning, she left his room, disappearing back to the living room.

With her retreat, Vader’s eyes snapped open as he shifted, sitting up on the bed to look for her retreating figure. A smile crossed his lips — a satisfied, delighted smile. Padmé had been mistaken in thinking he was asleep; and he’d heard her little confession. He’d heard her say she couldn’t hate him, which meant she must still love him. Love and hate, he knew, were closely related hence, if she didn’t and couldn’t hate him, it stood to reason she loved him still.

Just as he’d always known.

Eager to finally reclaim her, he threw back the covers and padded into the living room on silent, bare feet — and was drawn up short by a tearful tirade he hadn’t expected.

“Why, Anakin?”

He froze at the desperate, broken question, unable to answer — but it was immediately shown he wasn’t expected to.

“Why did you have to do this? Do this to us?”

There was a brief pause and he could see her bending forward, her face in her hands, even as she spoke to him from the lounge — a place he was sure she knew he’d never hear her... at least not while in bed asleep.

“I never wanted any of this. All I wanted was you... you and our children. But it was too much to ask, wasn’t it? All I wanted was my husband and my family, and you threw it all away! I know I promised to love you no matter what, but I can’t... and I can’t hate you either.”

Her questions were disjointed, broken and despairing. The sounds of a woman pushed beyond her endurance — the sound of a woman who wouldn’t welcome his presence. Despite that, he was still tempted to go to her, to demand what she meant — to make her explain why she didn’t think she could love him anymore when he hadn’t changed as much as she seemed to believe.

In the end, indecision forced his hand and he returned to bed before being found out to dwell on what she’d said. She wanted Anakin — a man he hadn’t been for almost two years. She wanted her *husband*, but refused to acknowledge the man he was as the man she’d married.

Lying awake, he considered what he’d heard — the proverbial moonlight confession that revealed just how much she was reacting to their close proximity. A proximity that wouldn’t be helped by his trip back to Coruscant. He frowned. Now was the *worst* possible time for him to be leaving; with Padmé’s declaration, it was clear to him that she was wavering on her long held stance concerning his identity.

His master had the worst timing.

When he got back, he decided, would be soon enough to approach her regarding her little speech. It would give her time to further come to terms with who and what he was and always had been. Once she had, he would have his wife right where he wanted her — in his life and in his bed to stay.

Month Twenty Four, Day 8 PEF

Chapter 38

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Eight PEF

Morning, however, was not what Vader expected.

Padmé was as hostile as she'd ever been, though somewhat more reserved, only to confront him as he stepped through the door.

"—guard at all times. Ensure the rotation is limited to your troops, Commander. Any unauthorized activity will be on your head."

"Yes, Lord Vader."

"So I'm to be caged and cared for while you're away, like some pet left to its master's whimsies, is that it? Why not just lock me in the detention level and be done with it?"

Vader turned with a frown to find his wife — hands on her hips — glaring at him. The door shut as he regarded her mildly, reminding himself of her declaration the night before and what it could potentially mean. "I prefer to keep your activities limited to the area for now; the Commander will ensure no harm comes to you."

"Like you have?"

Surprisingly, he ignored the scorn in her words. "Few people know of your arrival on this ship, Padmé. Until I return, it's safer for you to remain under guard."

"I don't care for your order," she snapped. "If they so much as step one foot inside this room, I'll finish them the way I started with you!"

And she would — he could see it in her eyes. Blazing with indignant fury, she had completely miscomprehended him; his smile turned smug. Leaning against the door, he regarded her thoughtfully. "We are talking of two separate circumstances."

To her frame of mind he was far too relaxed. "My circumstances haven't changed since my arrival — what else would you be talking about?"

"Just that — a change." Surveying her with a heavy lidded gaze, he swept her from head to toe with a deliberate look. "You are mine. When I return, we shall remedy your lack of introduction to my crew. For now, the Commander has his instructions."

"Guard me while you can't."

"Precisely; you're to be adequately escorted at all times while outside these chambers."

"I— what?"

Pushing away from the door, Vader strode towards her unhurriedly. His words had taken the wind from her sails, so to speak, and he wondered if she'd be grateful for the small taste of freedom. "You've been here just over a week with no stimulus beyond the contents of our quarters. The training room and several other recreational areas on board are now yours to explore — with a proper escort of course. You'll have your own security detail with you at all times, but you're free to roam and utilize specified areas of the ship."

His declaration shocked her.

So much so, that when he lifted his hand to brush the backs of his fingers over her cheek, she could only stare at him. He was giving her freedom to come and go; limited freedom, but the monotony of her days would change. Distraction from her thoughts and feelings would be available, as would the option of physically exhausting exercises. It was not only a solution to her cabin fever, but one that would let her get some small amount of sleep if nothing else.

"I'm grateful," she murmured unthinkingly, her mind on what she could do with that additional freedom.

"Before I leave," Vader brushed a stray hair from her cheek, hooking it gently over one ear as he stared down at her, "perhaps you should show me just how much."

His words, soft though they were, held an arrogance that snapped her back to the present. She jerked away from his hand, stepping back to glare at him. "Never!"

"Never is too long a time for you and I."

"How many times do I have to tell you I want nothing to do with you?"

He stepped towards her, stalking her. Padmé tried to step back further, but Vader was quicker, catching her and pulling her to him in one smooth movement. His lips locked with hers for a short, but fiercely passionate kiss — then he let her go. Taking a step back, he gauged her reaction. "If you wanted nothing to do with me, you wouldn't be entering my bedchamber while I slept."

She paled, any angry thoughts about his underhanded ways with affection gone. Retreating once more, she feared for what more he might have heard and held her tongue.

Fortunately — or unfortunately — he didn't keep her waiting for long as he advanced on her again. "You don't hate me, *can't* hate me, no matter how much you want to."

It was the smugness in his tone that pricked her temper. "Just because I can't force myself to hate you, doesn't mean I have any kind of tender feelings towards you either."

"But it doesn't mean you don't."

"Your arrogance is boundless!"

Vader didn't respond to her accusation, he simply continued to watch her as if he hadn't heard her comment. Her legs took her another step back as the intensity in his gaze caught her off guard. Not that Vader ever looked at her without intensity, but this was different. This was an echo, like the ones she was starting to see more and more, of Anakin.

A lump rose in her throat, making it hard for her to breathe as memories flooded her consciousness, bombarding her from all sides with images and sounds.

Anakin as a Padawan, swearing to find out who was trying to kill her; rushing to her rescue late at night and fulfilling his vow of protection; the look he'd given her in the bare moments before racing to save his Master. The same look he'd given her several times while in hiding; when he'd spoken of his devotion and attachment to her; the same look he was giving her now. She turned her face away, unable to bear the brunt of that regard or the emotional turmoil the memories unveiled; she spoke without thinking.

"Please, don't look at me like that."

Her soft plea was an echo of a time when neither of them had yet to be touched by darkness. It was a reminder, an almost identical echo of a beseeching plea from a lady to her protector — except neither of them were anywhere close to who they'd been that night before the fire.

The intensity in Vader's gaze didn't change, but his lips curved into the smirk that she'd quickly learned to hate. His voice was softly mocking, an edge in a fashion she wasn't expecting. "Why? Does it make you remember?"

Refusing to look at him, Padmé fought for the answer — both the one she should give and the one she longed to give. After the previous night's revelations regarding her mixed feelings towards him, she didn't exactly know what to say. He, surprisingly, let her gather her thoughts — and as a result she responded to him far more meekly than she hoped and her words were quiet.

"I remember the man that I love. The man who's my husband, and the father of my children. But I don't know where he is. I don't know what happened to him."

"Yes, you do. He's right here in front of you, like I've always been."

"No." Shaking her head, she retreated another step. "You may have the same face and same voice. You may have his eyes and his smile, but I don't know who you are." Her voice shook, as much with the admission as the pain of it. "I wonder if I ever have."

"You have." He told her, scoffing at the notion. "You know me well enough—"

"Do I?"

She looked back at him, cutting him off intentionally, unable to bear his arrogance. Ignoring the conflicted look that replaced the intensity in his gaze, she struggled to make her point. "I'll admit I've known all this time there's been this — this darkness in you. I fully acknowledged that and accepted it when you told me you slaughtered the Sand People." She shook her head. "That was a mistake — my mistake. But you told me you were better than that, you knew it was wrong, and *I believed you*. *I believed* you would do everything in your power to correct that wrong... and now I look at what you've become, at everything you've done, and I don't know who you are anymore. It's like I'm looking at a total stranger — a completely different person. And the worst part is this person has my husband's face!"

"Because that's who I am. Quit denying it!"

Shaking her head in denial, she rejected the idea, but not as vehemently as she would have liked. "No. No it's not. I look at you and I want so badly to believe it's a mask someone else is wearing. That this person will take it off and I'll know it isn't my husband underneath it all. That it's somebody else. Somebody completely different from the man I love."

"I *am* that man, Padmé. The only difference is *you* refuse to see that. I'm the same man you've always—"

"No!" She screamed it, denying it to the depths of her soul. "You're not the same at all! Regardless of what happened with the Sand People, the man that I love — Anakin — would never do the things—"

"*I am Anakin!*" The enraged roar echoed through the room, cutting her off. "I always have been. I always will be."

They stared at one another, his chest heaving in the sudden silence, the impact and import of what he'd just said hit him. Quickly, he moderated his tone and corrected himself. Using his sternest and most serious voice, he sought to leave her with no doubts as to his sincerity of the claim. "Regardless — I'm Darth Vader now and that's *not* going to change. I think it best you come to terms with that and accept it."

"Never." Her head shook once more, denying the claim. 'I'll never do that. I'll never believe Anakin and Darth Vader are one and the same. I can't! If I do then I'll know I've lost the man that I love — the *only* man I love — forever.' Stricken, she raised her hands to the bloom of hot color on her cheeks, turning her face away. "I can't stand this. I look at you and I see the man who holds my heart," — she glanced back at him, her tortured expression unchanged — "but no matter what you look like, *you're not him!* I don't know who you are."

Incensed, Vader stalked towards her, grabbing her arm when she made to retreat, and glared at her. His gaze was a challenge, a dare for her to refute his next statements — to deny the truth and implication behind his words. Keeping his tone level, his words were biting as he lashed back.

"You know *exactly* who I am. You always have — you just said so yourself. What I've done; you've accepted. And it's not just the Sand People. Count Dooku and Durge; remember them? I told you how I killed them, what I did, and not once did you shy away from me or tell me you were disgusted." A nasty smirk crossed his lips. "You did the exact opposite; you accepted it — accepted *me* without complaint. So, don't stand here and play the innocent with me. It's not very flattering."

His words had the desired effect, reaching deep within her to wound; the echo of truth in his words was as unmistakable as her memory of the events. Still, she hadn't expected the price to be so high — or him to be so right. Wrenching free of his grip, she crossed her arms over her chest defensively.

"I know I'm not innocent and I know the things you've done. But I didn't accept you slaughtering the Jedi and *Younglings!* I hated you for it. I was disgusted and horrified. *I still am!* I may have been blinded to what you did to the Sand People and during the war, but—"

"You weren't that either." He cut her off and with a lightning move reached out to grasp her face. His fingers closed about her jaw, delicately but implacably firm to ensure she couldn't escape. Bending his head, he met her half way as he used the pressure on her face to draw her closer. Grabbing his wrists, her nails dug into his gloves, pinching on the left arm, but doing nothing to the right. Struggling against his hold, Padmé sought to break it even as he brought her up on her toes, their noses almost touching as his breath feathered across her cheek.

“You were never blinded. You saw everything with your *own two eyes*; like you’re doing now. This time, though, you don’t want to admit everything you see is *me*. Well, it is, Padmé, and you know that. You’ve *always* known that. So, quit denying it.”

His words left her stunned, the sheer power behind his softly delivered statement holding her as much as the heat in his gaze. Unable to move, her gaze searched his face, dropping to his lips, tracing the arch of his nose, the line of the scar... and back to his vivid ice blue eyes. Her nerve endings tingled with his proximity, trapping her in a way his gaze couldn’t, and she was no longer fighting just him and his words, but her own attraction to him and his nearness.

The emotional storm shook her as much as the perceived gentleness in his late, but heartfelt plea. “Just quit it.”

It was the raw emotion in his gaze that called to her with those words, an echo of the abandonment and desolation that were her daily companions. Beneath it, at the heart of those azure eyes, lay the truth behind his words... but she wouldn’t give him the pleasure, she *couldn’t* if she wanted to maintain her distance. And she desperately needed distance. Her voice was as low and as tortured a sound as he’d ever heard when she gave him her answer.

“I can’t”

She was eased back to her feet, Vader’s fingertips caressing the curve of her neck with his whispered contradiction. “Yes, you can.”

Unable to help herself, Padmé’s gaze dropped back to his lips as they formed the words. Those strong, tempting lips... lips that were identical to those of her husband, just like the rest of his handsome features — but it was his lips that continually drew her, that made her ache almost as much as the heat in his gaze. The silence continued to stretch between them and Padmé found she couldn’t contradict his claim yet again; her lips simply wouldn’t form the words.

It was during this silence that Vader observed her, watched her closely, and couldn’t help but notice the direction of her gaze. Obliging her, he wet his lips and her gaze remained riveted for long moments. He knew she wanted him and it thrilled him to no end to have it confirmed yet again; this was simply another sign of that. The knowledge made his voice husky. “You want to kiss me, don’t you?”

Padmé’s eyes widened as her gaze jumped back to his, hot color tinting her cheeks. Fighting to find her voice, to bring her mind back to the present and away from the dangerous past, what came out instead of the vehement denial she wanted to give was an almost meek one. “No.”

“Yes, you do. You look at me and you see the man you fell in love with and married.” He smirked, secure in his assessment of the situation and there was a haughty tone of arrogant confidence in his voice. “You know you do.”

It was like being doused with ice water and Padmé was roused from the spell of his presence as if waking from a dream. Her heart clenched painfully in her chest and she tried to pull back, reaching for the will to break away from him, to fervently deny his accusation; what she found shook her to the core as the weak and choked retort passed her lips. “No, I don’t.”

“Then you will.” Running his thumb across her cheek, his smirk grew as he humored her, letting her know that he had her in that moment; that he didn’t believe her for all she said otherwise. “It’s just a matter of time.”

Padmé stumbled as she was abruptly released, catching a hold of the back of the couch to steady herself even as emotions reverberated through her system. Shame swept through her at her inability to fight him, and she struggled for composure. In that moment she’d never hated herself more; she’d almost yielded to him, given in to the stark pain and injury she saw reflected in his sky blue orbs.

Facing him, she noted that he hadn’t gone far and, without thinking, dared to challenge him once more. “Never.”

He paused on his way towards the door and turned to look back at her. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Padmé.”

“I’m not the one who did,” she shot back automatically, finding comfort in the familiar ground. This was an area she knew, one that did much to reestablish her inner equilibrium as she clenched her fingers on the back of the couch. “I’m not the one who turned their back on the woman they claimed to love and everything he knew she believed in because his *Master* told him to!”

“I did it to save you.”

“I didn’t need saving; didn’t want it.”

“I don’t have time to argue with you,” he told her sternly, turning on his heel and heading for the door. “We’ll discuss this when I get back.”

“As before, the Master calls and you come running.” She laughed derisively, her tone condescending as she found she wanted to make him hurt as much as she was. “I shouldn’t be surprised; once a slave, *always* a slave!”

Vader whirled, moving so quickly she didn’t have the time to blink as he was suddenly before her. “You understand *nothing*!”

“I understand enough,” she snapped. “You need someone holding your leash, telling you what to do. You’re not a man; you’re a worm who waits for their Master to dangle them on the next hook!”

His hand came up as if to strike her, but Padmé well remembered the gesture as she felt the first stirrings of fear. She masked it behind haughty bravado and spread her arms wide, tilting her chin at him defiantly. “Go ahead; end it. Kill me like you should have done that day on Mustafar; kill me like your *Master* wants!”

His reaction wasn’t one that she was expecting. Vader grabbed her by the shoulders and jerked her back to her toes just as his comlink beeped. His breath rasped unevenly across her cheek and she could see a slight tint of yellow in his once crystal blue orbs. Fingers dug deeply into her skin, bruising with the force of his grip and he shook her once.

But he didn’t speak.

Somehow, he couldn’t find the words.

The comlink beeped again and Padmé was suddenly released, falling back and over the sofa to land ungracefully on the cushions as Vader swept swiftly from the room. She'd hurt him; wounded him with her accusations in a fashion she hadn't thought possible — and lived. But then, Vader had ever been determined to keep her alive.

Shaking, Padmé lay back against the cushions and closed her eyes... and when the desolation came with tears hot on its heels, this time she didn't fight it.

Month Twenty Four, Day 9 PEF, morning

Chapter 39

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Nine PEF

The hiss of the stabilizers as they fired to balance the craft to prevent it from rolling on landing was overridden by the hiss of escaping steam several yards away. As the metallic feet hit the deck with gentle precision, the cockpit demagnetized and rolled back.

Troopers on the deck nearby stood quickly at attention as the pale, tempestuous shadow Lord Vader had brought on-board, for the first time several months earlier, alighted.

Weariness and pain were written into her movements as Asajj pushed herself free from the confining cockpit to plant her booted feet once again on the *Exactor's* deck. It wasn't home, but it was bigger than the tiny space she'd been traveling in nonstop for the last two days. It would do for now — until she could give her report, mask her distaste for Vader's presence, and return to her hunt.

Correction; *hunts*. Her Master kept her busy in ways she appreciated — ways that kept her away from *him*. Turning her head, she eyed the first nearby trooper.

"Lord Vader's location, Trooper."

"Lord Vader has been summoned back to Coruscant," was the immediate response. "He is not currently on board ship."

An unholy glee suffused her smirk and the weight of her news lifted from her shoulders considerably. *Summoned*. The word ran up and down her spine like a deliciously tempting lover's kiss. How he must have *hated* that! Vader wasn't there to receive her and her trophies could remain in her quarters for a few days yet; plus she wouldn't have to put up with the man's insufferable attitude. Asajj had no desire to spend more time in his company than necessary.

"When did he leave?"

"Last night, Lady Ventress."

"Excellent."

It meant that Vader would be gone several days. Coruscant was at least a day's travel away from where they were situated, two if he dawdled — which she doubted he would — plus the time it would take for him to give his report, heal from whatever injuries *his* Master deemed as punishment, and then return. He would be gone an estimated four to six days.

This was a grace period she hadn't expected... and one she could take advantage of. Immediately, her thoughts turned towards the largess she could expect with Vader gone; the troopers would listen to *her* as they knew she was ranked beyond them. How she could take

advantage of it, she wasn't entirely sure yet, but once she was clean and rested, something was bound to spark an idea. But, first things first.

"When was the last time we resupplied, Trooper?"

"Less than a week ago, Milady."

"Then there should be something edible." Not to mention clean clothes, boots, *cleansers* and other various things to make her journey back to the land of the amiable living more enjoyable. "Carry on."

The trooper clicked his heels together, and Asajj discarded him from her mind almost immediately as she strode from the deck. Thinking ahead to the hot shower, clean sheets and fresh clothes — unfortunately not likely in that order — that awaited her in her quarters and paired together with the meals which were sure to be edible from the mess, she paid little attention to her surroundings.

After weeks of being on guard for her very survival, allowing that guard to wane was just one more luxury she hadn't expected. Almost casually she made her way through the hallways towards her quarters. The chaotic din of the hangar fading behind her the further away she got from it.

So little was she tending to the people passing by her that she wasn't aware she was no longer alone until the voice of the *one* person on the ship she wished to see the *least*, jarred her from her thoughts.

"—care what his orders were, I simply wish to look."

Asajj glanced ahead to see two troopers blocking Padmé's path and her lips curled back into a sneer.

"Milady, you're not allowed to go anywhere near the hangar bay." One of the troopers was firm and insistent.

Padmé had been on board for just over a week — nine or ten days now — and looked no better, and no worse, than she had when she'd arrived. Much to Asajj's dismay, she appeared to be... coping with her new circumstance. She didn't look rested — and nothing would cover the dark shadows under her eyes — but she was clean, groomed immaculately and Asajj was dead certain that Padmé had *not* been brought on board in the slacks, t-shirt, leather jacket and boots she was in now.

Vader had obviously outfitted his wife when she'd done something to please him — the same way he'd outfitted her.

The thought soured the buoyant mood she'd been entertaining with his absence, and the urge to toss her new lightsabers aside was strong; but Asajj was a practical person and they *were* the best blades she'd ever wielded. Reward as they were for Padmé's capture and elimination as the Jedi Hunter, regardless of the fact they were a gift from Vader, was reason enough to keep them.

Shaking her head at Padmé's so obvious ploys to try and get by the troopers, Asajj turned on her heels to go another way — and was stopped by an outcry she didn't know how to interpret.

“Asajj!”

There was a wealth of meaning in the way Padmé said her name, and Asajj’s expression turned darker. A plea was hidden under the way Padmé called to her. A plea for what? Asajj had little doubt as to what role Padmé now served; after all, Vader didn’t grace *her* presence any more than necessary — and she hadn’t had to suffer his amorous attentions since Padmé’s arrival.

But the way Padmé had called her name implied that she was looking for a truce, a cessation of hostilities; possibly even a reversion to the friendship they’d once claimed. Impossible — Asajj would *never* trust Padmé after so deep a betrayal — but the little princess would consider forgiving *hers*? Would wonders never cease?

Glancing back over her shoulder, she saw Padmé making a motion her way to the troopers, and one continued to shake his head.

Asajj had a choice; she could leave Padmé to the care of her guard — which numbered four from what she could see. Obviously some form of security detail to allow her to roam the ship. How... quaint of Vader to provide her with that — or she could take the care of Vader’s wife into her own hands and let her *possibly* meet with an... *unfortunate* accident. Yet even as she contemplated the second option, she knew it wasn’t one. Padmé was a buffer between her and Vader — and one she didn’t intend to lose anytime soon.

The third option was to ensure that Padmé never wished to speak with her again. Not only was it more appealing than the other two, but it was also practical. Just another way of settling accounts between them. Making her decision, Asajj turned back to where Padmé was struggling with the troopers and crossed her arms over her chest.

Contemplating the woman who’d claimed and then betrayed her friendship, Asajj raked her with a deliberately insulting gaze from head to toe — and Padmé ceased trying to move closer, her back straightening with the implied insult the Force adept knew she could feel. Padmé had ever been more observant of her insults and careful to avoid them; not that Asajj cared to spare her any longer.

Padmé didn’t deserve any kind of consideration from *her*. Keeping her voice cool and lacking any kind of emotion, Asajj went on the attack.

“What do you want, Lady Vader?”

Padmé’s head snapped as if struck, all color draining from her face as her eyes rounded in surprise. The address hung between them, a gulf that Asajj’s arched brow dared her to cross... and one Padmé apparently seemed intent on bridging. The former senator’s eyes narrowed and flashed.

“*Don’t* call me that.”

“That’s your title,” Asajj informed her casually, aware that the men in Padmé’s guard were hanging on the words — and were likely to repeat the form of address as a part of their daily routine; yet more revenge, subtle as it was. “It would be remiss of me to neglect its use — knowing who you are.”

“If you knew anything about me, you’d know it for the falsehood it is!”

“Padmé Amidala Skywalker; married to Anakin Skywalker—”

“Stop!”

“— who became Darth Vader, known to his troops as Lord Vader,” Asajj’s eyes gleamed. “Which makes you, his *wife*; his lady — Lady Vader.”

“Vader is *not* my husband.”

“We’ve had this discussion before, *Padmé*,” was the softly sneered reprimand. “Lie to those around you all you want, but don’t lie to yourself. He looks like the man you married; sounds, smells and *tastes* like him too, I’m sure. I bet he even *feels* like him.”

“Anakin is dead!”

“Dead?” A bitter laugh escaped Asajj’s lips. “Hardly.”

The Force adept hadn’t missed Padmé’s flinch as she spoke about Vader. Considering how long Padmé been deluding herself about the man she was married to, Asajj felt no sympathy for the former senator. Vader was everything Padmé deserved and more; as far as she was concerned, Padmé had earned everything she got.

Advancing, Asajj waved the troopers back down the corridor, knowing they’d obey her.

While she wasn’t Vader, they knew she was Vader’s... *project* and didn’t dare disobey her for fear of incurring his wrath. On the other hand, she did notice they stopped within visual range — probably taking their instructions not to let Padmé out of their sights literally. Her lips twisted as she dismissed them from her thoughts as she faced off against Padmé. Her hands itched to grab the hilts of her sabers and strike her down — but she didn’t dare. Not yet. Vader would be a relentless adversary and she was unwilling to submit to his kind of degradation for any length of time with an alternative present. Padmé was as much here for Vader’s *pleasure* as Asajj’s protection.

“You and I both know he’s very much alive... in all *sorts* of ways.”

Padmé’s color went impossibly whiter, but her dark eyes stood out in stark contrast to the paleness of her skin — and flashed with ire. “If that’s a clumsy way of implying I’m sharing his bed, I’ll have you know I’m not!”

“Not yet,” malice entered Asajj’s smile. “But you will. You won’t have a choice.”

“I may not have it in me to kill him,” came the immediate response — and Asajj wondered just how *much* it cost her to admit it, “but I’ll castrate him if he lays a single hand on me!”

“You?” Asajj laughed, the sound tinted with dark mirth. “I couldn’t, and you think to do so?”

“What do you mean, *you* couldn’t?”

“I mean that if he wants you, he’ll find a way to make *you* want *him* — he’ll find a way to use your desires against you, to make you plead and beg for release... for fulfillment.” Her lips tilted in a cruel smile. “Take it from one who knows; your *husband* gets what he wants — even if it’s simply momentary satisfaction.”

Padmé's eyes flashed wide a second. "No," she said shaking her head and looking at Asajj warily.

It didn't seem possible, but Asajj's smile became crueler. "Why should I lie when the truth is so liberating?"

"Anakin would never... he wouldn't... he'd..." Padmé's struggle was visible in her eyes as she fought the possibility of what Asajj was implying, "You only ever wanted to kill each other!"

Pale fingers closed around Padmé's upper arm and she was yanked towards Asajj. The Force adept dug her fingers painfully into the muscle, making Padmé gasp.

"And what better to add an edge to passionate release than danger?" Asajj jerked Padmé closer still, so they were standing toe to toe, their noses almost touching. "Know that *he* insisted. *He* came after *me* and no way that I fought or *declined* made any difference to him."

"You're lying!" Struggling against Asajj's grip, Padmé stepped back and tried to kick her, but it was deftly side stepped. "I don't believe you."

"No?" Letting go of Padmé's arm as if it were unclean, and in fact it only made Asajj yearn for a shower more than before, she met the other woman's gaze head on even as she straightened. "Then I imagined the bite of his fingers as they bruised my flesh and the feel of his teeth as they cut skin? Or perhaps the raw power in his frame as he claimed what he felt was his due?"

"It's not true!"

The denial was a fraction weaker than before and Asajj could see Padmé's conflict clearly in her gaze; the reality of what she *knew* to be true warring with the truth she'd been presented. What she knew of Vader compared to what she remembered of Anakin.

There was a sadistic and twisted kind of pleasure in watching someone who'd betrayed her struggle with truths so irrefutable they seemed unreal. Padmé wouldn't likely accept the truth now — Asajj knew her well enough to know that much — but this discussion would haunt her and make her doubt the man she'd been sharing her... *quarters* with.

A dual stroke: one to discredit Vader, the other to injure Padmé. Opportunities like this rarely presented themselves and Asajj would not only take advantage of it — regardless of how much she'd had to suffer to obtain it — she'd capitalize on it. Pressing her advantage, her tone turned mild, knowing her words would have a greater impact. "Darkness breeds darkness; some more fully than others."

"Not that kind — he would never have touched you!"

"If you truly believed that, you wouldn't still be standing there, listening to me." It was almost unfair, Asajj reflected with a satanic sort of glee, that she could use her knowledge of Padmé's reactions against her so easily. "You know how long I've been serving him; how long I've been taking his punishments. Not all of my injuries were... *combat training* oriented."

Her words triggered some kind of switch in Padmé's mind — Asajj saw it clearly — and the former senator seemed to be reliving the moments where Asajj had unwittingly revealed

the extent of her injuries several months earlier. There was little doubt in Asajj's mind that the image had been ingrained in Padmé's mind and Asajj took full control of it now.

"The bruises; the injuries; the marks... deny my words all you like, but you can't deny your senses."

"No..."

"You can't change fact into fiction. As much as you wish it otherwise, *Lady Vader*, I was your *husband's* unwilling mistress." Padmé said nothing in return, Asajj doubted she *could* have said anything in that moment despite the fact her face revealed little more than shock. Turning in disgust, Asajj left Padmé standing silently in the corridor.

Rounding the corner, Asajj lashed out at the nearest bulkhead, putting the full force of her Force abilities behind it — and her fist went clear through the retaining wall between the corridor and the droid bay on the other side. She made no apologies for the intrusion; in truth never saw the individuals looking back at her from the other side, as she headed for her quarters.

A shower, she consoled herself grimly.

Paying no heed to anyone else she passed, Asajj was completely unaware of a nimbus of power emanating from her in a similar manner of her Master's. It was a manifestation that would not remain dormant for long.

Month Twenty Four, Day 9 PEF, noon

Chapter 40

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Nine PEF

Padmé stood rooted to the floor, staring after Asajj as she walked away. The words running over and over in her mind, visualizing the damage the Force adept referred to. All that time Asajj had been living with her demon, fighting him, *submitting* to his desires and she hadn't said a thing — hadn't betrayed Padmé... until Padmé's role as the Jedi Hunter had been exposed.

Anger warred with pain as the revelation formed into actual thought.

Asajj had been her *friend*; trusted her, and Padmé had deliberately used that trust to accomplish her goals... and then betrayed it at every turn. She'd used Asajj for her own ends, much the way Vader had; and the proof, the Force adept had claimed, was in the bruises. Except Asajj didn't know about Padmé's, and had only been referencing the ones Padmé had seen. Padmé's arms ached where the imprint of Vader's finger tips had left stark bruises on her skin — a parting gift after her below the belt hit — and she rubbed them to ease the ache.

She's wrong, Padmé told herself silently, watching Asajj stride away. *She has to be. Anakin wouldn't... he couldn't... he...*

Even as she struggled to form the thought, it disappeared, replaced by the images of Asajj's injuries and the visage of the man who had her imprisoned. A man with Anakin's traits, but not his temperament or restraint. A man who *claimed* to still be her husband, with the ties of that marriage binding and sacred.

He claimed she was his wife — would he have touched *Asajj* knowing she was out there, alive? Would he have forced the issue while claiming to love her — taken ease elsewhere when she'd denied him, and taken it by whatever means he could? The thought was as disturbing as it was impossible. But what seemed even *more* impossible was that she found she *cared* about the truth.

Asajj is wrong.

She had to be.

In the fifteen hours since Vader had left, Padmé had run an all together new gambit of emotions. While she was inconsolable on the matter of her children, she was now faced with the brutal reality that Vader hadn't only done what he'd done to the galaxy because of her, but that she'd helped turn him into the monster he'd become. Anakin had been suppressed, the man she'd given her heart to, destroyed in the inferno that had created Vader... except he'd called himself Anakin. Not only admitted it, but become angry by the fact she couldn't accept it and everything it implied.

And now this.

Just as she was starting to think she had things, *him*, figured out... No, Asajj had to be wrong; Vader could barely stand her and Anakin had despised her for a multitude of reasons; not the least of which was scarring his face. He wouldn't have touched her. There was no way Anakin would have turned to Asajj.

Would he?

"Lady Vader?"

Her head snapped around to look at the trooper who'd addressed her so formally — the commander of her security detail. His voice was filled with concern; and his form of address finally registered. Her gaze narrowed. "Do *not* call me that."

"It's true then."

"No." Padmé turned towards the hangar deck once more — and found her way immediately blocked by two troopers and crossed blasters. Frustrated, she planted her hands on her hips, but the commander cut her off before she could begin again.

"Our orders are very clear, milady. This section of the ship is off limits for now; Lord Vader instructed we record the areas of interest to you to be submitted to him upon his return — but you're not to be accessed until he's given us his clearance."

Meaning she wasn't to go anywhere without Vader's *permission*. Setting her lips in a displeased line, she tossed her head. "Is Artoo still on board?"

"Lord Vader's astromech?"

She didn't deign to answer the confirming query with anything more than a clipped nod.

"We'll summon him for you, milady. Shall we return to your quarters?"

Padmé didn't argue as she turned on her heel and strode back the way they'd come. It didn't take long to retrace the route they'd been travelling, but her mind wasn't focused on the journey — it was still on Asajj and her claims... and that Artoo had been with Vader all this time. He, she rationalized, would be able to discredit Asajj's pronouncement.

Artoo, to her surprise, was waiting when she re-entered the suite where she'd been held captive for the last week. It was galling to have nowhere else to go, but the troopers were intensely loyal to Vader and no one would even think of giving her another place to sleep — not even a spot in the brig where she'd feel vindicated.

Shutting the troopers out of the room as it closed behind her, she smiled, as she always did, upon seeing the little astromech. He didn't notice if it was lacking any kind of warmth. "I thought you'd be with him."

The domed head of the droid turned back and forth and he spewed a few quick sounds of explanation — and it forced Padmé closer to read the translation. Crouching, she quickly scanned what he had to say before looking up to regard him curiously.

"Never?"

He answered with a somewhat rude noise and her lips kicked into a genuine half smile.

“Not since you left for Mustafar? I’m sure you haven’t missed much. He probably just doesn’t want your memory wiped — it’s become standard practice for droids leaving Coruscant.”

Artoo was inclined to agree — and she didn’t need the translation to understand it. Patting his dome, Padmé pushed back to her feet and patted his once more, already preoccupied with what Asajj had told her. It couldn’t be real — could it?

Pacing away from him, she settled onto the arm of the couch in the main room and regarded Artoo with trepidation. The droid whistled a question, rolling towards her.

“I ran into Asajj today.”

The short, mournful wail in response coincided perfectly with the clenching of her stomach muscles. Padmé knew she shouldn’t seek Artoo’s council in this, but it was too unbelievable for words. Screwing up her courage — battered though it was — she put it to him.

“Artoo... has... has Asajj been spending a lot of time on board?”

His answer was complex, and she was forced to bend forward to read his reply. Her lips thinned. “Less since I arrived, is it? Was she here a lot before that?”

The answer was a firm affirmative twitter.

“I see. How much time, Artoo?”

The answer scrolled across the screen, and Padmé’s stomach turned itself inside out. *Weeks at a time*. Did it mean anything? It didn’t have to; Anakin had spent weeks at a time at the Temple and she’d never doubted his faithfulness to her; the idea that he’d cheated on her with Asajj was so... *beyond* the realm of possibility, it seemed surreal. But then, the man wasn’t precisely Anakin anymore. And the fact she even considered this as cheating was pushed to the back of her mind as she refused to acknowledge it. Instead she put her next question to Artoo.

“Do you have any video clips of her and... and Vader?”

A query met hers and she frowned.

“I don’t know; something from after they’ve been training? She’s his apprentice, right?”

Padmé straightened as the holo came on, projected from Artoo’s port in half-size. It lacked sound, indicating that Artoo either hadn’t been close enough to record it — or was sparing her. Watching the man who looked so much like her husband interact with Asajj was creepy; like a mockery of the life she’d been living to achieve her revenge and obtain her children. The silent tableau was a scene that could have easily been played out on the ship where she’d been living with Max and her little group.

It was unsettling.

Without glancing his way, her eyes glued to Vader’s form as he approached Asajj, she inquired. “Is there sound to go with this, Artoo?”

It came on immediately — and changed the context of what she was viewing.

“—*ver* know,” Asajj was saying heatedly, her whole body recoiling from Vader’s in a sense that Padmé had never seen. “*There are people who will wonder if I return... damaged.*”

“*Damaged?*”

Padmé cringed, her stomach twisting into a tight knot as she observed the man wearing *Anakin*’s face step closer to the woman she’d once called friend. Asajj’s visibly flinched as his hand came up, but she didn’t turn away as it grasped her upper arm with bruising force and lifted her slightly upwards.

“*I’ll damage you as I please; how you explain it is your affair.*”

“*Some are easier to explain than others.*”

Something in Vader’s expression on the holo reached deep within Padmé, grasping her heart in a firm vice and beginning to twist. She *knew* that look. It was a twisted caricature of what she’d once seen directed her way when Anakin was feeling amorous. Unable to breathe the words to stop the holo, it continued uninterrupted.

“*And some remain unseen.*” Vader threw her back into the room they’d just left, his free hand skimming the length of her body inappropriately. “*Prepare yourself, Ventress; you’ll not-*

“Turn it off.”

Somehow she choked out the command and the holo shut down immediately, cutting Vader off mid-sentence. It coalesced into the reality of the indignities Asajj had suffered at his hands. Vader had done it; he’d bedded her without qualm or thought, taking Asajj with a brutality Padmé couldn’t fathom.

Padmé wondered if she was going to be sick.

There was little doubt in her mind what had occurred in the minutes following the holo. Vader had tossed Asajj around, insulted her, physically coerced her and then made it plain she would suffer if she resisted. Closing her eyes against the swell of bile rising in the back of her throat, she struggled for control.

And found it in anger.

It started small, with indignation; how *dare* Vader toy with her while abusing Asajj? But it didn’t stop there. Indignation moved swiftly to outrage and then from outrage to icy calm. Vader had claimed to be her husband — claimed to love her! — claimed to *value* their vows. He *claimed* to be Anakin, despite his new title... and all along he’d been harboring this secret.

How dare he? How dare he be searching for her, claim to have thought of little else but her, and use Asajj like some... some dockside doxy!

The burn of fury in her gut was a welcome return after the uncertainty of the last couple of days. She’d begun to doubt her beliefs on the man responsible for her captivity, begun to empathize with him, to yield towards him because he seemed to understand her pain; but this only brought everything into focus.

All of his acting; his lies; *his* betrayal.

For all she'd done — and she knew she wasn't innocent by any means — his actions were in many ways much worse. He'd known she was alive and violated the sacred vows he claimed to want her to honor; the vows of a husband to his wife. While searching for her, he'd willingly desecrated the very vows he'd been preaching since her capture. Vows she'd seen no reason to keep since her husband was dead in her eyes. But he had desecrated them with a woman Padmé had considered a kindred spirit!

Well, Vader was in for a surprise upon his return, she vowed softly, turning her gaze to the viewport without really seeing it. If he thought to return to find her willing to continue as they had been.

Month Twenty Four, Day 10 PEF

Chapter 41

Outer Rim, Run Down Space Station — Month Twenty Four, Day Ten PEF

“Sir?”

“Not now, Threepio.”

Max’s irritated snap shut the droid up, just as he knew it would. The blasted goldenrod was more annoying than normal, and had been since the dissolution of Padmé’s band of rogues several days earlier. It had taken two days after the fact to parcel off the ships and assorted equipment, keeping only the unmarked shuttle he and Padmé had often used — if for no other reason than it was already fitted for Threepio.

Much as he didn’t enjoy the droid’s company, it was a touch reassuring to have it — but it also made things more difficult. Threepio’s golden plating was a part of him; it made him stand out, and it was something Max wasn’t skilled at changing. So he’d insisted Threepio start wearing a robe. The droid, to his surprise, had resisted — until Max had told him bluntly that it made them easier targets.

Threepio had a healthy sense of self preservation and Max wasn’t above tweaking it to get his way.

Especially now, when they were finally able to begin searching for Threepio’s Mistress. With a trail that was over a week old, Max knew there was little chance of being able to find an eyewitness to her disappearance — and he’d long ago given up on Asajj’s return — so he’d have to settle for the medium in which he was most comfortable.

In some ways, it was almost comforting to know he’d be sorting through hard data instead of the lies the people who frequented this kind of place excelled at. Data that had been tampered with was easier to discover than someone truly gifted at spinning a yarn — and easier to reconstruct the truth from. Plus, it would all be in the same place this time.

Except, in this instance, he doubted anyone would have wanted to tamper with what he was after, so obtaining it and sorting through it should be a relatively easy task.

Checking the sensor board, Max flipped on the comm. unit. “Station Alpha Papa Zeta, this is shuttlecraft One One Kilo, do you copy?”

“We copy, shuttle craft One One Kilo,” the comm. crackled with half static. *“State your business.”*

“Traders,” Max replied automatically; it was a cover he and Padmé had used often enough to feel authentic; and it helped he’d held back several supplies he knew the fringe element would pay handsomely to get their hands on. “Out of Mos Eisley.”

“You’re a ways out for trade, friend.”

“When you’re looking for the best deals, distance is irrelevant.”

There was a moment of silence, as if whoever was on the other end was struggling with his answer, but Max — despite his aversion to actually being the one to haggle during trading — knew that fringe types responded best to flattery... or threats. He was prepared to use both, but flattery was always the best first options. Toggling the comm. again, he offered the baited hook. “If it helps, I’ll send you my cargo manifest so you can tell me if I’m too far out.”

“Stand by.”

Max glanced back at Threepio, but the droid appeared to have shut down into his recharge mode. Whatever he’d been attempting to say was either forgotten — unlikely — or filed away for a time when Max wasn’t inclined to snap at him. Which suited Max just find.

“Shuttle One One Kilo, we stand ready to receive your manifest. Maintain your present orbit in both distance and speed.”

“Roger that; transmitting now.” And the sadist in him transmitted it encrypted in one of his own algorithms. Within moments the data transfer was complete and Max sat back in his seat, waiting. Counting backwards from ten, he examined his fingers, slowly lowering each one in time with his count.

Ten.

Nine.

Eight.

Seven.

Six.

Fi—

“Shuttle One One Kilo, your transmission was garbled.”

Spacers were so predictable. “Encrypted, actually. You don’t think I let just anyone read my manifest, do you?”

“Garbled, Shuttle One One Kilo; this isn’t an encryption from our database.”

“And it shouldn’t be; I wrote it yesterday.” He’d been bored; what else was he going to do while in hyperspace — talk to Threepio? “It’s for sale — if you’ve got the credits to pay for it — along with anything else in my hold... except the droid.”

Silence reigned for a half dozen heartbeats before coordinates began scrolling across the display. *Hangar bay Five Niner. Station control out.*

Settling forward, Max reached for the controls and flipped it off the autopilot that had been carrying them so far. Checking the coordinates, Max rolled the ship around, bringing them in on a landing vector. It handled smoothly and he could only hope the tune up it had underwent before Padmé’s disappearance would hold; the last thing he needed were bills for a ship that needed repair.

With his fingers light on the controls, Max danced them across the board and eased up on their speed. With any luck, an old friend of his was still on board station and had the information he sought. Max checked the viewports once again as the ship eased into the field and landed with a soft *thunk*, and found little to his liking. While the inside appeared to be far better kept than the out, the station lacked people to form a welcome committee — and if he wasn't mistaken, a single droid awaited them by the main doors to the rest of the station.

Great; more droids.

Maybe it was high time Threepio met a droid he could run off with. Yet, Max knew he'd never let the droid go — not yet anyway — while there was still a chance of tracking down Padmé. This system had been the first destination when she'd jumped away with Asajj, so it was good of a starting point as any.

Powering down the ship, Max pushed away from the controls and unbuckled his crash webbing. Walking over to Threepio, he slapped one hand on the switch on the back of the droid to bring him back on line. "It'd probably be better for you to stay with the ship since you're so conspicuous," he said without preamble once he got Threepio's attention. "But I'm not willing to trust that the ship won't be searched and certain items go 'missing' before we leave. I'd rather you not be one of them."

"I would prefer that, sir."

"I thought so." Turning away, he headed for the hatch. "Well, come on; if we're lucky this place will have the three things we need."

"And what would those be?"

"Information, a shower, and a hot meal. I don't know about you, but I'm pretty sick of ration packs."

Threepio simply shook his head as he shuffled after Max. He would *never* understand humans.

The slicer led the way to the hatch and opened it without qualm. This was the kind of place he remembered; he knew the rules, liked the conflict — and had been pretty good at never picking sides. Until Padmé. Shaking his head, he descended the ramp and headed for the main corridor access; and was stopped just short of them by the droid standing at the ready. "Cargo manifest."

A box on the wall flashed and Max pulled a datadisc from his pocket. Inserting it — as was standard practice — he let it read for a moment before the droid straightened. "Precious cargo; level sixteen; lodging suits Delta Six. Welcome to Space station Alpha Papa Zeta; please enjoy your stay."

The doors opened and Max, ignoring the droid, motioned for Threepio to enter before he did. The golden droid, cloaked in brown cloth, shuffled forward. Max retrieved his list, and the instructions towards their quarters that would have been added, before slipping it into a datapad and following. The map of the station appeared and Max, without stopping, directed Threepio before him towards the turbo lifts.

Looking up, once in the main hallway, Max stopped. The whole side of the corridor was open to space, held back by a single barrier designed to keep both air and heat within, and the

space outside; the resulting view was phenomenal. Letting out a low whistle, Max's lips kicked into a reluctantly admiring half-smile. Whoever had programmed that piece of machinery had written one hell of a command line.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Threepio?"

"Are we really intending to stay for some time?"

"No, Threepio — but we have to be courteous. They assign quarters to everyone based on what they're carrying; a place to... freshen up or whatever. Usually, depending on what you have for cargo, the captain of the station makes inquiries and sets up potential buyers. Since our goal is to speak with him — or her — directly, I doubt they'll be sending many interested parties our way."

"What makes you say that, sir?"

"By letting them know I've an encryption with no public cipher — as of yet — that's currently not on the market or used by anyone else, it will ensure they come to us first. It's how I made my living before I ran across the Alliance and Padmé. Big fish always want to be bigger."

"I see."

"I doubt it. Come on; in you go," keying open their temporary quarters, Max didn't even bother to look around; he already knew what he'd see.

It would be well appointed, with all of the latest luxuries an out of the way place like this could afford as a way to entice him to stay; he'd seen the routine a thousand times. The message from the commanding officer, as he'd predicted, was waiting. All script, it requested his presence for an introductory dinner, and expressed interest in some minor items in his hold. Max snorted at the see-through smoke screen and tossed it aside.

With the meeting time set for 2 hours from now, he'd have time for a couple of the things he'd hoped to find. Without a word to Threepio, he headed for the 'fresher and the first shower he'd had in days. Once he was finished, he'd head for the bed and sack out for an hour or two and trust the droid to keep watch. Once he was rested, he could concentrate on what exactly he needed to ask and what he'd need to have, to help put him on the right path to find Padmé.

Threepio watched Max settle in for their short stay, and trundled off to a nearby port to plug into the station's network. While Max relaxed, he had his own series of investigative avenues to try.

In the end, Threepio came up with nothing and Max traded his new encryption for all of the sensor logs from the station for the surrounding star system.

The minor items on the cargo manifest had lost the feigned interest pretty quickly when he named his terms for his software, and the captain had responded readily. Their logs held little information beyond the size, shape and light speed capability of the vessels that passed

through the system, but Max knew it would be a place to start. In addition, he was able to obtain several fresh meals to take with him, and some new clothes; all in all, the sensor information had been his real goal and even though he knew he'd suffered a loss in the trade, it had been well worth it.

Carefully sifting through the data, he picked out the logs from the day of Padmé's departure. Narrowing it down to anything after the time she'd departed from their base, he began searching for transit patterns to match the rough size of the shuttle she and Asajj had been flying. In the end, it left him with three possibilities — and, with nothing better to go on, he began plotting courses for each one.

The search for Padmé had begun.

Month Twenty Four, Day 11 PEF, morning

Welcome new readers, hello again to those following this religiously (posters and lurkers alike) — my apologies for how long it has been between updates:

Chapters 43 through to about 50 are written and in the process of being beta-red. 43 is undergoing a serious re-write as it's not suitable for the forum in a way that my other "M" stuff is. If you'd like a copy of chapter 43 unedited, please PM me and I will send it your way. It is, however, too big to send over the message system here.

As soon as it's 'forum worthy' Chapter 43 will be posted and you all have the option of messaging me; I do ask one thing — DO NOT ask for the un-edited chapter 43 if you are under 18.

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 42

Coruscant — Month Twenty Four, Day Eleven PEF

"I'm just following orders, my Lord; would you please step this way?"

Snap!

The lifeless body of the aide hit the deck as Vader threw it away with the toss of his hand. "Any *more* questions?"

Outside his quarters, the guards shrank back, leaving him a clear passage to exit. They thought to escort *him*, did they? With the guards cowering on either side, Vader strode from his room and headed for the lifts that would take him to the Emperor. He didn't note the looks exchanged behind his back, and truly didn't care. He needed no escort to see his Master — preferred none — and knew the tactic was simply to unbalance him.

It wasn't necessary.

Despite the two days travel time, he was still reeling — seething really — over Padmé's last jibes. It hadn't hurt, not initially, so cleanly had it cut. No; the pain had come when he'd landed the night before as the realization of what she'd said finally sunk it. It couldn't have come at a worse time. Dealing with his Master required a clear thought process and Vader knew he was anything but clear at the moment. Not only was that potentially dangerous for himself, but for the secrets he harbored — namely Padmé's continued existence.

It didn't help that her parting shot still stung. If it was because she'd been so accurate or something else, it didn't matter; her words had served as an unpleasant reminder that his life — no matter how much control he seemed to have — he truly had none at all. It chafed, like

an ill-fitting tunic, and made him all the more irritable when he wanted nothing more than to be calm and collected. Only the knowledge that his Master would likely take her away if he knew of Padmé's presence on the *Exactor* held him in check.

He couldn't lose her; not now, not ever.

No matter how badly she'd hurt him, he knew what he'd told Sidious at his inception as Lord Vader was true; he *couldn't* live without her. He'd tried and nothing had felt right; nothing had completed him like her presence did. Hostile or not, just *knowing* she was there, within his reach, was enough — for the moment.

Upon his return, things would change, he vowed.

Padmé needed to learn to respect him again, to accept him as he was — as he'd always been — and he would see to it that she did. She was his wife, for Force sakes — hadn't their vows contained the words "honor and obey" somewhere within them?

Striding through the hallways, a part of him seethed with the implied insult from his Master; the *summons* had been unnecessary. Everything the Emperor needed to know had been in his verbal report — from the number of Jedi eliminated, thanks in part to Asajj, to the search for the dissidents and terrorist groups who continued to assault the newly formed Empire.

Yet the *summons* had remained.

It was as if Emperor Palpatine wanted to twist the screws and remind him of his place; a place Vader wasn't soon to forget. Thanks to the pact he'd made with the Sith Lord, his wife was alive and he'd do it all over again if it meant saving her life. Vader simply disliked being reminded of what he owed his Master — and having it rubbed in his face.

The doors before Vader opened without hesitation as he strode from the promenade outside his quarters on the lower level of the senate building and headed for the lift. None stood in his way — it helped that his private quarters on Coruscant were out of the way and isolated from the lackeys of the Senate — and those he did pass averted their gazes.

Most of them anyway since they were male; the women tended to stare openly but Vader paid them no heed. He didn't much care for their attention; they weren't Padmé and never could be. His steps sure, the inner turmoil left him on edge as his emotions careened within him, Padmé's spite-filled farewell haunting him with every step.

You need someone holding your leash, telling you what to do. You're not a man; you're a worm who waits for their Master to dangle them on the next hook!

Yet, despite the inner chaos those words had inflicted, their echo was more haunting than their initial brutality. Everything he'd done in going along with Palpatine's plan had been to ensure her safety — which is why her final words at his parting had hurt so much.

Go ahead; end it. Kill me like you should have done that day on Mustafar; kill me like your Master wants!

Like his Master wants... she didn't understand!

How had things gotten so twisted? Couldn't she see that he was a man following a path that just happened to match the man he'd chosen as his mentor and Master? His *Sith* Master,

perhaps, but that didn't make him a slave. No, it made him something more; better than any who would stand against him. Yet, her words still burned for he *had* followed the orders of his mentor initially, no matter how he chose to take liberties with their interpretation now. No matter how he looked at it, he was *still* taking orders from the Emperor — his Master; but then, so were everyone else in the galaxy.

Pushing past a trio of aides who'd been waiting as the lift arrived the moment he stepped into its vicinity, he turned on them with a dark look and they cowered away. Inside he was still seething with the idea of being summoned so casually back, like a slave dancing to the whim of their master that something came through in his expression. It was no surprise when the lift, stopping on several other floors, didn't gain any other occupants.

Vader's moods were already legendary and none would cross him when vexed.

At last, the lift doors opened on the main promenade and Vader swept out with a purposeful stride, heading for the Emperor's recently completed audience chamber; a room he hadn't yet seen. With the attack of the Jedi two years prior, and the destruction of much of his office and senate building, the Emperor had voted for a complete remodel — and his office had held priority.

Vader's expression hardened as he strode through a connecting door and past the aide at the desk who normally announced the Emperor's visitors. He paid the aide no heed and went straight towards the doors leading to the office. Only here, just outside the portal did he stop. Inhaling deeply, he called the Force — pulling at its very source — to calm his nerves. He had no reason to be nervous; this meeting was routine and the man inside more of a father than an Emperor.

After all, he shared the ideals and goals of the Emperor, and the man had always been his closest and dearest friend — never judging; never criticizing.

That in mind, he cleared his mind and pushed aside everything regarding his errant wife and the upheaval she'd caused within him. Yes; it hurt, but he couldn't afford to let a little thing like her opinion make him falter now. If he did, she'd be dead and so would he; if nothing else, this past eighteen months had taught him what a living hell his life would be without her — spiteful or not.

Exhaling, Vader pushed the doors open with both hands and strode into the main office — and stopped. Emperor Palpatine didn't so much as flinch from whatever he was doing as the doors were pulled shut behind Vader, and Vader didn't notice.

All around him were symbols of Palpatine's power; the main sitting area which had always been sunk into the floor now covered the entire office, except for the steps leading to a dais in the far corner where Palpatine's desk sat. The desk was angled so that, should the man shift and turn to regard the door, his chair was unobstructed. A sweeping contraption, it arced over his head in a mess of silver and onyx designed to impress.

Never one to be dazzled by trappings, Vader descended the two steps to the sunken floor and strode confidently forward.

"You *summoned* me, my Master?"

The Emperor paused at the veiled insolence in his tone and his lips twitched and he placed the stylus he was using to the side and turned to face Vader. A faint smile creased the withered and sagging face, his inner corruption now visible on his visage. Standing firm, Vader had faced more vile looking creatures than the man who no longer resembled his mentor; he crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

Arcs of blue lighting shot out from Palpatine's fingers, catching Vader completely off guard. The Force sang no warning as the bolts streaked down from the platform and wrapped around his body. Nerve endings fired and he let out a startled yell of pain as he went down on one knee, his metallic hand hitting the floor flat as he braced himself.

Surprised, his gaze still never left that of the man he'd chosen as his Master, and the Emperor descended the steps with almost casual grace, sending another wave of painful punishment lancing through his system. Tasting blood, Vader gritted his teeth and refused to cry out again, his mind racing back to the whippings of his childhood — and he understood this for what it was.

Shame swept through him as the assault seemed to go on and on, reminding him of his place at Palpatine's feet — and it only stopped the moment his *Master's* feet touched the floor. His muscles twitching, his motor control gone, Vader dropped his head and closed his eyes as he struggled to catch his breath; the smell of burnt flesh teased his nostrils.

"You've disappointed me — my apprentice."

The visible flinch that crossed his face couldn't be masked so soon after the punishment, and he opened his eyes to stare at the carpet — into which his hand had sunk to the wrist. Padmé's voice echoed in his head once more. *Once a slave, always a slave!* His metallic fingers clenched, tearing the fabric slightly. As he was fighting to get a hold of himself and banish the memory, the hem of Palpatine's robe came into view.

"Your report on the rogue Force adept was less than accurate, Lord Vader; Asajj Ventress has not been neutralized as you stated."

Swallowing hard, Vader pushed back from his place and forced himself to rise. Standing, he was taller than the Emperor and he needed that advantage now. He deliberately blanked any other thoughts from his mind and focused on the accusation — mild as it had been phrased — and not collapse once again to the floor; it was a welcome distraction.

"I was accurate, my Master," he returned, trying to remember exactly what he'd sent by way of message six months ago. It was inevitable that Asajj's continued existence would have come to Palpatine's attention and he well remembered how careful he'd been not to state she'd been terminated. "Her threat to the Empire has been terminated."

"I wanted *her* terminated," snapped back the older man. "Your orders were clear!"

"My orders, my Master, were to end her threat to the stability of the Empire; I have done so."

Contemplating his apprentice, Palpatine folded his hands within his sleeves. "Walk with me." It was not a request.

Vader fell into step, remembering others times they had done just this and began traversing the Emperor's new audience chambers. More impressive than the last, each was designed to

intimidate and overwhelm. Had it been anyone than Vader beside him, Palpatine's influence would have been obvious in his choice of decor and construction. As it was, Vader had known for some time his mentor — now Master — was a man of vision and power.

"Explain how you've neutralized Ventress and why you've left her as a free agent; if you can."

"She is easily cowed with the right... *motivation*." Vader earned a look at those words, and he didn't doubt for a second that his Master understood the implication — or that he disapproved. "With the many tasks you set your fleet, I felt it would be prudent to utilize her particular set of skills than lose them. The arrangement has been beneficial to all."

"By hunting the Jedi — a responsibility of yours, Vader. Are you not up to the task?"

"Of course I am, my Master," Vader managed not to snap at the older man as they continued to walk around his office. "But the elimination of the Jedi are only one task of the many set me. Ventress is a dedicated hunter of Jedi, seeking both their elimination and humiliation; why should I waste so valuable an asset and opportunity?"

"Because it was a task set to you."

"She's but one of many agents and her responsibilities are many, as are mine. Not only is she hunting Jedi, she's been tasked with finding the terrorist group who've been raiding the outlying sectors and destroying imperial facilities and property."

"Another task I set to you, Vader," returned the Emperor darkly. "Perhaps it is time I reevaluate your role in this war."

"Given a dedicated search, I could find the band," Vader snapped back defensively. "She is no more important an agent than a multitude of others; she's... akin to the bounty hunters hired for specialized work."

The silence that followed that pronouncement was almost damning before the Emperor stopped and turned, pivoting on one foot to stare at his apprentice. "Have you successfully located her then?"

"You know Ventress has—"

"Padmé."

Vader's head turned, as if struck, to regard his Master with a sudden guarded expression. "Padmé." Careful not to phrase her name as a question, he was also careful to keep his tone neutral.

It had the most unusual reaction; the Emperor laughed. Laughed! "You have much to learn, my young apprentice. I knew you would search for *your wife* the moment you learned of her continued existence. No ruse of her in death, however elaborate, could keep you from her."

Vader, wisely, said nothing; he didn't trust himself to. If he began speaking, he was terribly afraid he'd tell his Master just what he'd found upon retrieving his wife and he wasn't ready for the man to know she was once again in his grasp.

Figuratively speaking of course.

“Ventress may be a hunter of the Jedi, but she is mainly a hunter at heart.” There was a gleam in the older man’s eyes, as if he were toying with the younger man. It was a gleam Vader didn’t particularly like. “Has she led you to your elusive prey?”

Had she? Physically perhaps, but the Padmé waiting for him in his quarters back on the *Exactor* was *not* the same woman he’d been so set on finding. She’d changed, become harder, colder — turned away from him in a time when he’d only ever done everything to ensure her continued survival. So — from a certain point of view — he supposed the answer was no. Considering that, he shook his head — and lied through his teeth. “I’ve not tasked her with locating my elusive and errant wife.”

“Perhaps you should.”

“Sir?” It was the almost casual way the Emperor had said it that prompted the automatic response; the man had sounded like his mentor of old — but not for long.

“Padmé is a formidable power, Lord Vader, capable of rallying star systems to a cause with an impassioned speech. Much as you are now capable of casting fear through those same systems with a glimpse of your face.”

The message underlying the little speech was clear; if the Emperor caught Padmé, he’d kill her for the threat she posed to his new Empire. People like Padmé couldn’t be left alive to make mischief and bring about insurrection; she was exactly the type of person the rebellion had been built around.

Just the thought made Vader’s blood run cold, and the Emperor’s warning was not missed, as the older man turned the conversation towards the last several engagements he’d faced. His responses were automatic, programmed, his mind whirling as he struggled with the implication of Palpatine’s warning.

Did his Master know Padmé was with him, held under guard? Was he being implicitly — but tactfully — warned that she was his responsibility and any actions she took would now reflect on him? Could it be there hadn’t been a deeper meaning to the man’s words — unlikely as it seemed — and they were just that; words? Or was this a way to get him to admit that Padmé was his prisoner and to offer assurances that she, too, had been neutralized as a threat?

Reeling, he didn’t notice as they walked back into the main audience chamber and struggled to keep up with the conversation. Somehow, he managed to do so but inside he was spinning. He’d always known that Palpatine hadn’t liked Padmé’s influence on him; would the older man order her killed if he knew of their present circumstances?

Stopping at the base of the throne-like structure that held the Emperor’s desk — and what he privately dubbed the man’s ‘throne’ — Vader’s thoughts came back to the present with a snap to find the older man regarding him shrewdly.

“A fine plan, Lord Vader; how soon can you implement it?”

Fine plan? What had he been spouting off? Somehow, he managed a nonchalant kind of shrug. “As soon as required.”

“The necessary guards will be—”

“That won’t be necessary, my Master,” he interjected suddenly, realizing what he’d proposed in his absent-minded state. The *last* thing he wanted was members of the Emperor’s elite force joining him on the *Exactor* where they’d report back to the Emperor on Vader’s captive! “I can do their initial training while I’m here — this afternoon in fact — and leave behind instructions for completion.”

“And you are certain the clones are capable of developing minor immunities to such manipulations?”

“I’ve had varying degrees of success with my personal guard,” Vader conceded, knowing he needed to give some form of proof despite the Emperor’s initial interest. “A precautionary pilot project should a Jedi gain access to the ship — or Ventress attempt to turn them against me. Commander Carmichael is a part of your palace guard and well versed in these kinds of tactics. He served on the front lines with Captain Rex and I.”

“Excellent. See it is done immediately.”

It was a dismissal, one Vader couldn’t miss, and an order all in one. Straightening sharply, he nodded once, bowed with a curt “Yes, my Master.” before spinning on the ball of his foot and heading for the door. He’d reached it before the Emperor’s voice stopped him again.

“Lord Vader.”

Turning, he found the Emperor regarding him from the top of the raised platform, his face all but invisible in the depths of his hood.

“Her conduct is on your head.”

With a bow, a silent acknowledgment of the responsibility, Vader turned and departed. The only thing that occupied his thoughts as he walked back towards the lift was a mystery he didn’t dare ask for clarification on and one that left him with a sense of deep unease.

Had his Master been speaking of Asajj... or Padmé?

Month Twenty Four, Day 11 PEF, evening

Author's Note: So I know this chapter has been a *long* time in coming and I apologize for that. I post this over at the Force boards too, and one of the reason it's taken so long to get back to it, is the nature of this particular post. 1) it's far too graphic even for the "M" rating on this site and 2) the force boards are a *PG* site, so I've had to tone it down — and let me tell you it's NOT been easy.

Anyone who would like the -full— version of this is encouraged to send me your e-mail address via PM — I do warn you however, that it's an NC-17 chapter.

My co-author and I are in the process of getting it polished to post at the adult fan fiction version of this site to ensure it's there in all its glory along with the other NC-17 chapters for this fic that are actually a part of it. Unfortunately, this one is important to plot and not just character development, so it had to undergo some serious revision.

A **HUGE** thanks to those of you who sent me notes and comments and suggestions. Many of them were incorporated, a lot of them were similar (which was surprising) or identical after a fashion, but as you can see, they meshed so well! This turned out better than I could have hoped and I don't think it lost the punch it needed. Thanks a million guys — you know who you are!

I do believe, however, that this is what a lot of you have been looking forward to *grin* Enjoy.

Chapter 43

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Eleven PEF

Vader's shuttle landed back on the *Exactor* almost a full twenty four hours after his meeting with the Emperor and he was in little better shape than when he'd left. Sleep deprived after opening his big mouth to his Master about improving the defensive tactics of an elite group of soldiers, and the necessity of beginning their training, he was still reeling from the conversations with both Master and wife.

The landing cycle and shut down were done almost on auto pilot as Vader unstrapped his crash webbing with the intention of departing as soon as it was humanly possible. Maybe sooner. The whine of the engines hadn't died away before his feet were solidly on the deck and striding towards the doors that led — eventually — to his quarters.

His walk was uneventful. Stormtroopers and various technicians stepped out of his way with respectful postures and gestures he only vaguely registered. Reaching his quarters, he palmed the door open and stepped inside, heading for his bedchamber and the 'fresher he knew was beside it. Half way across the floor he stopped, turning back towards the door with a frown, and retraced his steps.

Sure enough, the Stormtroopers he'd assigned as his wife's guard were nowhere to be seen and the room had the empty feel from before her arrival. Standing in the open doorway, he considered the implications. Padmé had to be somewhere on the ship — someone would have notified him otherwise — and her guard would be with her. She wouldn't be expecting him back so soon, nor would she likely expect him today despite the fact she likely knew he'd be returning.

Uncertain of how long she'd been gone, he closed the door and headed for the 'fresher. Perhaps, by the time she returned, he'd be feeling more like himself and *she* would be waiting to apologize for her parting remarks. His lips twisted as he stepped into the 'fresher.

And maybe the Jedi would rise from the ashes to overthrow the Empire.

Not likely.

Vader returned to find the room as dark and empty as he'd left it shortly after his time in the 'fresher. Duty had called and he'd been forced to make an appearance on the bridge for an emergency staff 'meeting' — they hadn't handled themselves well in his absence — and there were many... vacancies that needed to be filled. Feeling even more wrung out than before, he headed for his chambers without searching for a light.

Padmé, he knew, would be in the living room and if he was quiet, he could avoid her. Much as he wanted to see his wife, he didn't have the patience their encounters required tonight. Slipping past the open living area, he could discern no trace of her but her guards were back at their posts, which meant she was around there somewhere. She never strayed far from the area at night, almost as if she'd claimed it as her own — a part of his sanctum for her own purposes.

The sight that greeted him when he arrived in his room was *not* the one he expected.

Padmé lay on his bed, one hand tucked underneath her cheek, her body curled in a near fetal position underneath the sheets — and fast asleep. Her skin shone like alabaster against the ebony hue of his bedding, her hair spread out across his pillows like something from a forgotten dream.

Blinking, he rubbed both hands over his face, certain he was hallucinating; the spiteful Padmé he'd left scant days ago wouldn't be caught dead in his bed. Resigned to that fact, he dropped his hands, expecting to see her gone.

Her image remained.

His brows pulling together, his fogged mind was unable to process the leap from what she'd said upon his departure to the very reality staring him in the face. Not one to question good fortune when it struck, despite its whimsies, he undid the clasp of his cloak and hung it on the back of the door.

Glancing back to the bed to ensure she hadn't moved or disappeared, he tugged his shirt from his breeches and hauled it over his head; Padmé remained, her breathing deep and even. Finally she was where she belonged; in his bed, waiting for his return. It was bare moments

later that his breeches followed the shirt to the floor, and he was sliding beneath the covers with her.

Padmé shifted in her sleep as the cool air struck her skin and it was only then that Vader realized she was dressed in a small top with leggings; not nearly as welcoming as he'd begun to think. It didn't matter; closing his eyes on a weary sigh, he reached for and curled around her, noting just how thin she was for the first time. The move was as natural as breathing, as timeless as the blackness of space and brought her back flush against his front.

And Padmé stiffened.

Padmé woke the moment her back contacted Vader's front, suddenly and intimately aware of where she'd been caught and by whom... and the fact he was barely dressed, if at all.

His time away had given her much to think about, just as Asajj's revelations had. Too much time. She'd become complacent to think he wouldn't return in the evening and catch her in here; in thinking herself *safe* because he wouldn't be so cruel as to destroy and eliminate her need for a confrontation by doing something rude like returning in the middle of the night.

Except he had.

She'd believed herself to be safe, that she would have plenty of warning upon his return; that she'd have a chance to prepare herself.

The anger and hurt had continued to swirl within her as his absence continued, making it impossible to distinguish one from the other whenever she thought of Asajj and his betrayal. She'd been angry and hurt and, in one of those overpowering emotional moments, had crawled into his bed.

He might have been millions of light years away dealing with Palpatine, but she could claim a part of him for hers; a part that would never change. She needed the reminder of who he'd been, instead of the man he'd become and the bed offered her that memory.

It smelled like him; it felt like him, reminding her of the comfort and strength she'd used to find in his embrace. Without thinking, she'd burrowed into the sheets, wrapping herself within them, smelling them, and *remembered* — so much so she now fought to forget. Vader wore her husband's face for all he wasn't Anakin and claiming his bed to sleep in alone was like reclaiming a part of *him* for herself.

It was a comfort she badly needed in the wake of Asajj's betrayal; knowledge that *Anakin* would never have betrayed her so completely. So she'd taken comfort where she could get it — and had it shattered by his early return

Rolling, her mind already having caught up with the situation, Padmé's gaze locked with Vader's cloudy, exhausted blue eyes and for half a heartbeat she felt her resolve waver. Except she *remembered* every bruise she'd seen on Asajj's pale skin; she *remembered* the holo Artoo had shown her; she *remembered* his grip on her and the marks he'd left on her skin. And in the remembering, her emotions solidified into crystal clear need for vengeance. A need to make him hurt as she did with the knowledge of his betrayal.

Her reaction took less than a half second and Vader let out a surprised yelp as her fist connected with the side of his face.

The arm around her loosened and Padmé rolled away, sliding from the bed and the covers to land on the opposite side of the mattress from the door. Her hands flat on the mattress, she glared down at him.

Vader's sleepy blues were now wide and sparkling, one hand rubbing his jaw as he glared at her. "What'd you do that for?"

"You've earned that and more."

"Earned what?" Irritated, Vader pushed himself up into a sitting position, the sheet draped casually across his lap and exposing a shadowed expanse of naked flesh that, despite in the darkened room, tempted her even now. "Another night of interrupted sleep? Come back to bed, Padmé."

"Not if you were the last man in the galaxy and my life depended on it."

Taking in her stance, Vader looked at her — *really* looked at her — for the first time since he'd returned. In the semi-darkness he could barely make out her features and with a flick of his wrist, brought the lights up. Padmé's eyes glittered with renewed hatred and spite, her spirit blazing at him from across the expanse of his bed. Anger had returned to her soul; except this anger wasn't tainted in the same manner it had been when she'd first been brought on board.

Disgust.

Shame.

Jealousy.

All of these emotions and more buffeted him from her direction; emotions that his presence had triggered. Interesting. The last especially — what did Padmé have to be jealous of? Sliding one leg out, he balanced one forearm across it, the fabric of the sheet stretched between his knees. "You've a new score to settle."

"Or an old one; depends on how you look at it."

His lips thinned. "I may once have prescribed to the 'certain point of view' theory, but no longer. What have I done, in my absence, that you cannot forgive?"

"What haven't you done?" Her angry, spiteful words held a bitterness that hadn't been there in the last few days before his trip to Coruscant. "Blackmail, murder, rape; there's nothing you haven't sunk to, is there?"

"Two of three," blue eyes glittering like ice chips, he considered her carefully, "the last is something I'm completely innocent of."

Padmé regarded him silently, willing herself to believe him — but ultimately unable to. No matter his relaxed posture, or the slightly bored look to his expression that screamed his innocence, nothing he could do or say would erase the humiliation Asajj hadn't wanted her to see and had ultimately come down to her. "Somehow," she told him evenly, her fingers clenching in the sheet, "I *doubt* you're innocent of blackmail."

“The *last*, Padmé; I’ve never stooped to—”

“Say it and I’ll cut out your tongue.”

“And miss all its pleasures?” Her gaze narrowed and his taunts subsided. “You seem certain.”

“Don’t I just.” It wasn’t a question. “*You* don’t seem surprised.”

“Should I be?” he shifted, adjusting the sheet across his lap. “You believe the worst about me without getting my side of it; why should this be any different?”

“Your side of any story is twisted by what you perceive to be ‘truth’.”

“Isn’t yours? Just because you think the worst of me, doesn’t make it true.”

“Except in your case, it’s *always* true.”

“Only if you believe it to be.” Leaning forward, the sheet dipped at a dangerous angle and a cocky smile replaced the slightly amused grin he’d been wearing before — as if to say he was through toying with her. He patted the bed beside him. “Come back to bed and I’ll prove how... unnecessary it would be for me to do as you claim.”

“Never.”

“Never is a long time, my love.” His tone was silky, persuasive. “Too long for you and me.”

“For you, maybe,” she told him icily, her knuckles having lost all feeling where they gripped the sheet bloodlessly. His almost playful mood was grating and insulting and all Padmé could do was try to crack it, to hurt him in the same fashion his actions had hurt her. Not that she acknowledged it as her motivation; she simply wanted to break his composure — to get a *reaction* “But Max was more than an adequate replacement.”

Vader went still, so still the burning in his gaze seemed to blaze into a life of its own and threatened to consume her. “And just *what* is that supposed to mean?”

Undeterred, Padmé tossed her head haughtily. “It means I’m *human*. My husband is dead — there’s no reason to remain faithful to a dead man!”

Righteous indignation flared in Vader’s eyes. “*I* am your husband,” his words were soft, lethal. “You know it; you’ve always known it if you acknowledge it or not. You remain faithful to *me*.”

Padmé stood up; her haughty look took on a mocking air, traces of bitterness evident in her features. It was a look that very clearly rubbed in the painful truth of what she was implying and it made Vader’s heart clench.

“No! You deny it — *now*; take it back.”

“No.”

Vader shifted under the covers. “You’d never betray me like that, Padmé; you love me too much.”

"I loved Anakin, and Anakin is dead! *He* wouldn't have wanted me to waste away; *He* would have wanted me to be happy!"

"I *do* want you to be happy; with *me*!"

"Do you?" Her tone turned scathing. "You want me with you, but you won't give me my freedom. You want things the way they were, but you won't give up the powers you've gained to chase it. You want me to trust you, but you've given me every reason not to! Contradictions; conflicting signals — you don't even know what you really want!"

"I *want* my wife back."

"Well you're never going to get her back; because of all the things you've done, the woman you knew no longer exists."

"The things *I*'ve done? I wasn't the one who betrayed our vows!"

Padmé looked at Vader in stunned disbelief. Had he really just said that? Sputtering, it took her a moment before she was able to get any words out. "R-really," she finally said spitefully. "Then what was *Asajj*? The result of some temporary lapse of memory of the vows you claim to hold so dear?"

Vader's eyes flashed for the briefest of moments with the knowledge that he had been caught in his own lie.

Padmé bent back down to the bed and gave him a condescending smile. "I know all about her. I know what you did *with her*, what you did *to her*! I saw the bruises!" With stinging rage, she spoke through gritted teeth. "You *dare* to throw accusations at me about something you're just as guilty of. Something you obviously were able to justify to yourself, and carry on with *Asajj* in a despicable manner!"

"*Asajj* is my apprentice and none of your business."

"None of my business? None of my — *she was your mistress!*"

By this point, they were almost chest to chest, Vader still on the bed, his gaze nearly level with hers, his breathing just as erratic. They stared at each other, glaring into one another's eyes and his narrowed. "*And Max was your lover,*" he said darkly, his words succinct and laced with barely suppressed anger at the thought of another man touching her. His heart felt hollow and he sneered at her, "But *Asajj* earned it, just as I'm sure Max did."

Padmé's eyes flared and her hand came in wildly from the side. Vader caught her wrist, using the momentum to swing her back and around onto the bed.

"She enjoyed it Padmé. Even begged me for completion — every time," Vader taunted cruelly as he twisted her around. He wanted to make sure she was feeling the same kind of pain he was. 'Did you beg for it with Max? Did he complete you the way I did?' He maneuvered her so she was partially underneath him. "*Did you call out his name at the peak of passion the way you always did mine?*" his eyes glittering with jealous rage as he asked the question through gritted teeth. Leaning in closer, he asked dark and huskily, "Will you call out my name now like you used to whenever I brought you to completion? Will you beg it from me?"

"I'll never call out your name, for *any* reason," Padmé said as anger and pain twisted together and lanced through her from his words. 'And Max knew how to satisfy my needs so that I'll *never* beg for *anything* from you!' She struggled, bucking and kicking as she fought against his hold. "Let me go!"

"Not until you remember your place — in my life and in my bed!"

Padmé couldn't believe his audacity to demand such a thing after the malicious way he'd taunted her. Sneering at him, she spoke spitefully, "I'd rather remember my place in Max's bed, or his in mine, and the way he touched me time and time again. How he made me tremble when he'd—"

Vader's eyes darkened and his jaw clenched tight for the briefest of moments before he swooped down with deliberation, not giving her a chance to say any more. She attempted to turn her head to the side, but the effort proved futile as his lips settled over hers in a bruising, almost punishing kiss. Locking her jaw, Padmé continued to struggle for a moment as the pressure of the kiss forced her head back into the tangled sheets and mattress.

Managing to free herself with a toss of her head, she knocked her temple into his, her eyes blazing with anger. "Is this how you won Asajj over? By giving her no choice?"

"She was given a choice."

"What, submit or die? Get off me!"

"Not a choice you would like," Vader readjusted his hold on her. "But a choice none-the-less."

"At least I chose a willing lover — one who didn't have to be forcefully coerced—"

"You never should have chosen a lover at all!" Vader cut her off, his eyes blazing. "You're my wife! *Mine!* No one's supposed to touch you but *me*. And no one ever will again!" His lips slammed back on hers, silencing her before she could continue her hurtful tirade. Anger warred with his desire for her and for revenge.

Frustrations exploded on both ends as Vader's intent to silence, and Padmé's own need for some form of willful refusal collided. Their lips melded and broke before melding again, her teeth nipping at his lip, daring him to try anything further — and Vader dared.

Driven by jealousy, hungry to reclaim her, Vader didn't question his motives as he set about assaulting her senses with a series of intimate touches, using his knowledge of her body against her.

Padmé responded in kind, not to be outdone by his underhanded approach as her fingers skinned over his shoulder. Her free hand, which had just moments before been pushing at his naked chest, now slid into the wealth of hair at the nape of his neck.

The mood abruptly changed as passions long denied speared through the overriding emotions. Heat swirled low in her gut, desire and lust mixing with anger and hurt even as it searched for an outlet. It exploded through her body with an almost feverish heat and she went from struggling to gain the upper hand, to trying to get closer.

Her fingers tangled in the thick strands of his hair and, using it as leverage, she tugged once. Vader hissed, his lips leaving hers as he eased backwards against the hold. He looked at

her with hooded eyes, waiting to see what she would do and if she would try to escape — except Padmé didn't. He'd started this, attempting to brand her with his kisses as if to banish any other man — Max — from her thoughts.

Following her hand, Padmé used it as leverage and rolled Vader to his back. After, she straddled his hips, hyper-aware of the hard lean lines of his body; a body she'd known so intimately before — and kissed him in the same bruising, *claiming* fashion as he'd done her.

Her wrist sprang free as Vader released his grasp, and her hands now traveled the length and breadth of his muscular chest, reacquainting herself with the feel of him beneath her as she boldly opened her mouth and tested the seam of his lips with her tongue. His lips parted instantly and his hands came to rest on the bare skin of her waist under the small top.

The frantic mating of their mouths was accompanied by the equally impatient fumbling of their hands as Vader sought to divest her of her clothing, and Padmé rocked against him to free him from the sheets. Their lips parted with a smacking sound as he rid her of the small shirt, leaving her upper half naked and exposed to his hungry gaze. In the dim light, her skin seemed to glow from within.

Barely taking the time to regard her, he jackknifed upwards from an almost inclined position to taste her. Padmé's head fell back at the feel of his lips on her skin, rough though they were, and moaned to the ceiling as she pressed into the sensation. It drove her back, giving him leeway to move.

Rolling with a growl, Vader's hands splayed across her back moved adeptly downwards and slid into the waist band of her leggings. Tempted as he was to tear them off, he didn't; instead his fingertips dug into her skin ever so slightly as he knelt and urged her upwards. She rocked off the bed moments before she came to her knees tightly against him. Her leggings were pushed immediately down and off even as her lips explored his chest.

Letting out a harsh breath, Vader crushed her to him and drew her mouth back to his. Their tongues duelled as the sheet was finally freed, leaving skin on skin for the first time in almost two years. The feel of it was electrifying, almost overwhelming as Padmé drove him down and onto his back with the force of her body. Their lips parted for a split second before frantically finding one another again.

Her hands touched him with deliberate intent even as his fingers touched her and knew she was ready. Ready in a way she hadn't been for him in years; two long, agonizing years that felt more like a nightmare than anything he'd experienced to date. Now, stroking her deliberately and having her respond so readily to his touch, was like a dream he was afraid to lose. No words were spoken as each sought to brand the other with their body. Moans and groans of pleasures long since denied but never forgotten were their language; a language of want and need.

And in a moment of complete accord, two years of separation faded; the barriers between them faded and perpetually at odds Darth Vader and Padmé ceased to exist. For those brief moments, old hurts were forgotten, the past disappeared and Anakin and Padmé were simply two people in love once more, glorifying in the truest expression of the emotion.

As quickly as it sparked, the dream faded leaving reality. Caresses were hard touches and every touch seemed to brand; as if to re-stake her claim.

He hushed her with a kiss, rolling so she was beneath him, keeping his lips on hers. Her nails dug into his back and shoulders, leaving furrows that would no doubt bleed. He reveled in it, in the feel of having his wife with him once more — in the feel of being together as intimately as two people could be. This was what he'd wanted; here there was no outside galaxy.

There was simply he and Padmé; husband and wife — two beings too long separated, too long denied this bliss.

His motions almost punitive, Vader was determined to ruin her for any other man. She was his. *His!* He was going to remind her of that, and how it used to be between them, and make sure she forgot about Max completely. Determined she would remember no man but he after this night, he knew this had been too long in coming.

Then, just as the bruising pace seemed set to engulf them both—

He stopped.

Panting and gasping for breath as he stared down at his wife, sweat beading off his brow, his hair hanging about his face as he moved once, slowly. She gasped, arching, her hands clutching at his shoulders. Repeating the motion, he was stunned to see tears on the lashes of her closed eyes and he bent to kiss them away.

“Anakin...” his name passed her lips on a note of desolation as she pressed into his touch once more, wanting desperately to hold him close, pleading with him.

“I’m here,” bringing his head to her shoulder; he pressed his lips to her bare skin even as their bodies resumed the dance they’d long since denied.

“Anakin... Come back; please come back to me...”

“I’m right here, Padmé. I always have been.”

“No,” her head shook even as she responded to him. “No... You’re not; you’re lost... Vader; he took you away from me — the only man I’ll ever love...”

“I’m right here,” he insisted, his lips sliding across her skin. ‘Look at me, Padmé.’ As if on strings, her eyelids fluttered open as his hand grasped hers, pressing it tightly against his heart. “Feel me; I’m here.”

“Anakin...” Her other hand came up to hold his face, tears in her beautiful brown orbs. “Stay with me, don’t go away again... don’t leave me.”

“Never.”

He cupped her cheek, leaving her hand over his heart but even as she leaned into his touch she let out a soft sound that bordered on a scream — but sounded like a sob. “Another promise you can’t...” she gasped, “can’t... Ani...” her body arched as she began to quake in his grasp — and this time he didn’t hinder it.

With her nails digging into his back, passion-darkened blue eyes watched her as she shuddered in his arms, screaming his name.

“Anakin!”

With a growl, he let go the last of his control before her name — a prayer on his lips — escaped and he shuddered within her grasp as she had his. Peace, true peace, enveloped him for the first time since donning the mantle of Vader; a peace he hadn't felt since the last time he'd been so thoroughly intertwined with her. Forehead to forehead, the only sound in the room was the ragged, sharp edge as they tried to catch their breath.

It was a broken silence, a temporary peace, that wouldn't last long.

This isn't happening. The thought stole in like a thief only to careen about inside her head with ever growing disbelief. It was surreal, like something out of a dream; a feeling she'd never expected to experience again. A lot like the replete feeling which made her limbs heavy and left her other senses in a haze.

"Padmé," the feel of his breath across her cheek was familiar; the backs of his fingers following with such an achingly gentle caress it squeezed her heart in a fashion she'd thought herself immune to. "I know you're awake; you've never been one to fall asleep after lovemaking."

Lovemaking.

Her eyes snapped open, meeting amused blue orbs, and her actions came crashing down about her. How she'd become so languidly content; what she'd just done to get there; the man who'd taken her there. *Anakin*. But, looking into those blue eyes, she knew without a doubt it was a lie. Perhaps a side of him, long dormant, had shown its face during those unguarded moments they just shared. Perhaps she really had glimpsed the tattered shreds of who he'd once been, but looking into those cold blue eyes as reality returned only brought her world crashing down about her once more.

Anakin was dead and Vader remained.

Pushing him away, she had surprise as her ally as he fell to one side. "Padmé? What-?"

"This was a mistake." Rolling from his bed, Padmé reached for her leggings — that were currently caught around the bed post where they'd been flung bare minutes before.

"A mis— this wasn't a mistake," Vader made to follow and she pinned him with a look as she righted the piece of clothing and tugged it on. "You're my wife, Padmé."

"I was *Anakin's* wife," she shot back, ignoring the uncomfortable fact she could remember calling him just that in the throes of passion. Something she told him she'd never do — and prayed he wouldn't throw back in her face. With jerky movements, she pulled on her shirt. "You're not him. You never will be him again."

"Padmé—"

"No!" she whirled towards the bed, her arms outstretched as he lifted the sheet to climb out after her. "I don't love you, I will *never* love you; this was a mistake and it will *never* happen again."

Though irritated by her words, Vader cocked an eyebrow, looking at her imperiously from his still-sitting position. "You keep saying that, but I find it hard to believe you. If you didn't

love me, you never would have *made love* with me — and enjoyed it so thoroughly.”

Stiffening, Padmé glared darkly at him; a sharp retort on her tongue.

Vader continued before she could say it. “Whatever name you call me, you *are* my wife and your place is beside me — in bed and out.”

“My place will *never* be beside you. What happened here doesn’t change anything.”

“It changes everything.” Pushing to his feet, he advanced on her in all his naked glory. “You still want me; that’s something to build on.”

“Lust isn’t a basis for any relationship beyond a master and his *mistress*.” Her barb was deliberate in letting him know she hadn’t forgotten about Asajj. “And for Force sakes, put some clothes on!”

“Tempted to do something you shouldn’t?”

“We’ve already done it,” backing away, she rounded the end of the bed and somehow managed to keep her gaze on his face. “And we won’t do it again.”

Vader reached out and in one swift movement grabbed her wrist just as she turned to go. Pulling her to him, he wrapped her firmly in his arms. “You seem so certain of that, Padmé. How can you deny what you’ve clearly been craving and your body has been longing for?”

Padmé, struggling to get out of his arms — and seriously contemplating kneeing him in the groin to get him to let go — stilled at the level of arrogance his words contained and laughed harshly in his face. “You don’t know what I’ve been longing for,” she said bitterly. “You have no idea, and you never will.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, dear wife.” Vader held her tighter, his voice dangerously calm and composed. ‘I know you’ve been missing my touch. Far more than you’ve been missing someone else’s,’ he added, returning the barb she so carefully aimed at him. “Your actions spoke louder than all your words ever could. You tell me it doesn’t change anything, but you’ve proven that it does. What happened here means something to you.”

A vehement shake of her head accompanied a hard push against his chest with the heel of her hands to try and free herself from his arms. “It means nothing.”

Vader leaned in closer and said in a low voice, “I don’t believe that, and you don’t either.”

Padmé’s head snapped up to meet his gaze, her eyes burning bright in indignation. “Don’t tell me what I do or don’t believe. You have no right—”

A wicked grin came to Vader’s face and he held Padmé tighter still, effectively stopping her struggling. “I have every right. I also have the right to claim my wife, especially when she’s such a willing partner.” Vader’s mouth came down then to capture hers in a hungry kiss, cutting off any retort she might have made.

Though angry at herself for succumbing to her baser needs and falling into bed with Darth Vader, Padmé responded to the devouring kiss despite her best effort not to. Her body was still humming in the afterglow, though, she ruthlessly denied it. That was quickly overridden by a strong, almost panicked desire to stop and get as far away from him as his quarters allowed before she ended up in bed with him once more.

Her palms flat against his bare chest, Padmé pushed with all her might, breaking the kiss in the process. He released her, a satisfied smirk on his face as he watched her step — almost stumble — back. Padmé glowered at him, knowing he had gotten extreme pleasure out of the moment and her reaction. “I hate you,” she mumbled just loud enough for him to hear.

“No, you don’t,” the look in his blue eyes was intense.

Padmé’s anger flared at the tone in his voice; so cock-sure and certain, and her eyes narrowed. “Man-handle me like that again, and I’ll make you regret it.”

“You weren’t complaining just moments ago.”

“Like I said; it was a mistake.”

“It was inevitable.” His correction was carefully annunciated. “You’re my wife; your place is here.”

“My place is as far away from you as I can get in a snow suit without seams!” With a final glare, she turned on her heel. “You won’t touch me again.”

Watching her, a frown on his face, Vader glared in the direction she’d gone. Striding to the door as she crossed the room towards the sofa she’d claimed as hers, he couldn’t give her the last word. “I won’t touch you as I did tonight,” he corrected deliberately, “until you ask me to.”

She whirled but he’d already disappeared back into his room, closing the door between them and effectively silencing whatever she would have said.

It was a temporary measure, for they would see each other come morning, but one that would enable him to sleep. Climbing back into bed, Vader pulled the covers up — and exhaled on a tortured sigh as her scent rose to engulf him. Anger and hurt were quick on the tail of the tortured expression; she was his wife — she should be sleeping beside him after their frenzied lovemaking and looking forward to more. Instead, she preferred the cold isolation of the couch and the turmoil of her thoughts.

Flinging one arm across his eyes, he willed himself to sleep. But sleep, despite his exhaustion, was a long time in coming.

Month Twenty Four, Day 12 PEF, morning

Author's Note: Well, it'sd March 1st, which means it back to posting schedule... Updates on the 1st and 15th — or 16th of the Month. Thanks for reading guys :)

Chapter 44

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Twelve PEF

The silence was almost deafening the following morning when Vader emerged from his room. Padmé sat where he'd left her in the lounge, her back to the bedroom door. He hadn't, however, missed the stiffening of her posture when his gaze came to rest on her.

"Good morning."

She said nothing, ignoring him, and an amused half smile flitted across his face for a moment before it was gone. The silent treatment; if they hadn't spent time in his bed last night he might have found it insulting. Of course, that she'd preferred to spend the night on the sofa instead of in his arms irked him to no end. "You can't ignore this — or me — forever Padmé; we're not going anywhere."

Her response was to shift her head a fraction more away from him, her gaze straight on the viewport — or at least that's where he believed it to be. Her message was loud and clear. Even if she couldn't ignore him, she would bloody well try.

Heading for the kitchenette, Vader found it empty and without breakfast waiting — could he honestly expect otherwise after her treatment of him this morning? — and opened the crisper. He wasn't much of a cook, but he could at least feed himself and his wife adequately, even if she was determined to give him the silent treatment. If nothing else, she might just say 'thank you' for breakfast and he was willing to use any and all weapons against her.

After her willing participation last night, *she* was fair game.

Breakfast wasn't anything fancy — a couple bowls of fruit with some fried bread and cream coupled with eggs and blue milk — but he set the table with a smile that was closer to a smirk. Despite her having spent the night on the couch, *he'd* slept relatively peacefully after their physical encounter, plagued by nothing more than the continuous urge to strangle this Max person and make him pay for touching his wife.

His dreams, when he'd slid back between the covers, had been centered completely on Padmé and the knowledge that tonight had been but a taste; already he craved more. More of her touch, her kiss — of her willing surrender. And now, with last night's revelations, he was certain it would be sooner rather than later.

Back in the main area of the suite, Padmé listened to the sounds of Vader in the kitchen and told herself to ignore him while careening between being horrified at her actions and smug. Smugly horrified. There was a contradiction if she'd ever heard one — but that's what she was.

Smug that after all this time the intimacy between them was as devastatingly earth shattering and all encompassing as it had always been — and horrified that she'd been overcome by his appeal to show such a moment of weakness. Smug that she was well aware he'd not shared even a shred of that kind of connection with Asajj — and horrified she cared.

Smugly horrified.

Satiated but appalled.

No matter what name she gave it, it all boiled down to some very simple facts. Ever since Asajj had claimed her place as Vader's mistress, Padmé had been unable to deny that it ate at her. The Force Adept's intention had been to injure, to inflict damage — and she'd succeeded.

Not that Padmé would have ever admitted to the jealousy the claim had unleashed — a jealousy that had driven her into the arms of the man who'd once been her husband, intent on reclaiming the very thing she'd been lacking these past two years. Intent on erasing the taint of Asajj's accusation from her mind. Intent on reminding the man just what he'd been missing when he'd settled for less.

Her thoughts were turned so completely inwards, she missed Vader's call for breakfast.

Denial.

It was her constant companion these days. A silent, oppressive cloud that hung about Vader with salacious interest and intent — one she could never admit to or she'd be risking more than just her sanity.

No.

It was a risk she was unwilling and unable to take; no matter what physical draw he held for her. His appeal was the only safe acceptance she would grudgingly admit to. He drew her like no other man, could satisfy her like no one else — and for the short time where she was in his arms last night, the rest of the galaxy had faded away. No Empire; no Rebellion; no Max or Asajj. There had been nothing but the bed and the man who'd held her — and for a few, brief shining moments, he'd been her Anakin.

Padmé clutched painfully at her chest, shamefully remembering the way she'd tearfully pleaded with him — something she said she'd never do — *begged* him to come back to her, and a self-loathing — so intense it blindsided her — almost made her sick. She'd *begged* the man who wore her husband's face for something he could never give her; she'd begged a murderer and a monster for reprieve.

Disgusted with herself, she swallowed the bile that rose in the back of her throat and threatened to make a mess of the sofa she'd claimed as hers.

"Padmé."

Jerking at the sound of his voice, her head swung towards where he watched her, irritation plain on his face; it obviously wasn't the first time he'd called her. Their gazes locked and

images flooded back. She remember the way he'd looked at her the night before, held her, *touched* her. That one look into his cerulean eyes, no matter what emotion they contained, was enough to ensure she craved him once more — but she couldn't, *wouldn't* cleave to the desire again no matter what it took. It was a bliss that came with a heavy cost — and one she couldn't afford to pay.

Deliberately, she turned her face away. Without seeing him, she practically *felt* the anger take hold. The way he seemed to grow; could envision his eyes narrowing, his fists clenching, his teeth grating...

"I'm talking to you, *wife*."

But she wouldn't be baited; let him try, there was nothing he could do or say at that moment that would make her loathe him as much as she despised herself that morning.

Vader didn't make another attempt, instead talking to someone on his comm. link before sweeping out of the room, but Padmé probably wouldn't have noticed if he had. She was too wrapped up in her own thoughts, too wrapped up in what had happened and the conflict within her that wasn't — for once — about her children. So conflicted in fact, that she wasn't yet consciously aware that this morning marked her second week of being Vader's prisoner.

His voice, in that irritated and demanding tone, had sent off another round of memories, including his arrogant vow after she'd left his bed.

"I won't touch you as I did tonight, until you ask me to."

The memory of his promise was followed by a soft moan as she buried her face in her hands and rocked back and forth. *Never*, she silently vowed. *Never again. He's not Anakin anymore; he can never be Anakin again; Anakin is gone...*

Unfortunately, it didn't seem to matter if Anakin was dead, for there was enough of him left in the man sharing her gilded cell that the line between them was blurring.

Anakin had been hers and only hers; an exclusivity she'd taken for granted and one that had spurred the desperation of last night. The idea that the pleasures he'd once reserved solely for her had been partaken of by the woman she'd once called friend was enough to drive Padmé to murder.

Or worse.

Much worse.

It had driven her into the arms of the very man she'd sworn repeatedly to resist until her dying breath and made a mockery of the strength she'd taken such pride in obtaining. It only made matters even more unbearable that she didn't blame Asajj. Vader had manipulated the Force Adept and forced her submission. The fault was entirely his and yet she'd been unable to control the violent surge of emotion upon waking to find him beside her.

Anger and hurt had certainly played a part in catapulting her out of his bed, but the reasons she'd been there in the first place were something she wasn't proud of and wouldn't have admitted to if pressed. And no doubt Vader *would* press her for those answers eventually... once he consciously realized *he'd* come to *her* in his bed and not the other way around.

Careening between the near-hysterical urges to cry or laugh, Padmé pushed to her feet and took the few steps necessary to bring her to the viewport. Restless, feeling trapped and hemmed in far more than before, she paced back and forth in front of the opaque reflective surface and unconsciously took in her appearance.

Wild hair — she hadn't taken the time to comb it, her mind elsewhere since she'd left his room.

Rumpled clothing — she'd not only stormed out of his room, she'd hastily donned a jacket and heavier pants without taking the time to shower. The idea of being so close to him, of getting *naked* on the other side of a flimsy door he could override at any time, struck her as too much as an invitation. Vader would have seen it as such and likely joined her if she wanted him to or not.

A bite mark, the bruise clearly visible just under the collar of her shirt, caught her attention and her hands flew to the neckline, tugging it closed. Mortified he'd marked her, as if stamping her with proof of his ownership; she hoped it would fade quickly even as she knew it would not.

Anakin's love bites had a tendency to cling — just like the memory of the man.

He's not Anakin!

Closing her eyes, Padmé fought against irrational, angry tears and pressed her forehead to the viewport without letting go of her shirt. Vader wasn't Anakin; he might have been once, but no more and despite the fact a part of her treacherous soul still viewed him as hers, he wasn't. He was her captor and jailer and she couldn't let him become more.

What she willfully ignored was that he already had.

Sweeping out of his chambers, Vader didn't so much as glance at the security detail stationed outside as he headed for the bridge, called by the urgent summons of the General. Padmé's defiance, her unwillingness to speak with him this morning coupled with her deliberate and intentional slight against his presence all coalesced into a white hot fury that *begged* for an outlet; if this summons was a false alarm, someone would pay.

Or perhaps profit, having saved his wife from the rigors of his foul temper no matter how much she'd earned them.

A quick ride up the turbolift expelled him onto the bridge and into the organized chaos of an unexpected battle. Officers shouted orders, ensigns in charge of various pits dashed back and forth between consoles to get the most up to date information from over the shoulders of the crew manning the equipment.

Vader pulled up short, crossing his arms over his chest as he surveyed the scene — for the moment unnoticed.

The viewports around the bridge revealed a mis-mash of ships had ambushed the *Exactor* as they'd been in transit to their next Hyperspace jump point. Mid-system, without viable entry points, if they tried to transit here they'd likely be ripped apart by the gravity well of the

sun. An expertly chosen location for an ambush meaning either the force arrayed against them was either very smart — or very lucky.

Either way, they were soon to be dead.

Vader was itching for a fight, more so than any other day of the week, and after that initial survey of the scene to pick his target, he strode onto the bridge with his cape billowing behind him.

“Lord Vader!” One of the Colonels saluted smartly, stepping confidently forward. “There was no way we could have seen them, my lord, as they came from around the solar body, and — urk!”

Closing his fist as he raised his hand, Vader spared the man barely a thought and clenched his fist without dragging the execution out. The sound of bone cracking brought an almost immediate halt to the activity in the immediate vicinity as those closest turned to look, and the ripple effect slid across the bridge until a momentary silence let him drop the corpse with a sickening thump.

“Are there any other excuses?” A quick survey of the bridge area brought no reply. “I thought not. General.”

“My lord?”

He waved idly at the corpse for it to be taken away, and two young ensigns sprang forward to do just that, as he turned to face the General. “What is the current situation?”

“We’re evenly matched, and they have surprise on their side.”

“*Had* General.”

“Yes, my lord.” Around them the deck seemed to get its second breath as the corpse of the unfortunate Colonel was dragged away. “Our fighters are veering off now on intercept courses with the two nearest ships. One on one we can overpower any of the vessels.”

But not all of them working in tandem. Turning his gaze back to the ships arrayed against them, a smile crept over Vader’s lips. “How many need to be destroyed before we regain the advantage?”

“The four biggest, sir.”

“Excellent.” Vader turned to one of the commanding officers across the way. “And General.”

“My lord?”

Using his abilities to get the greatest impact, Vader lifted his arm — took great satisfaction in the man’s visible blanch, cower and flinch — and pointed across the room. Glass shattered and a small red button depressed as if on its own. The general quarters call to arms sang through the crew quarters and most public areas of the ship. The response was almost immediate as stations around the ship began to check in their readiness.

“Next time, general quarters *before* you summon me.”

With his own quarters carefully shielded against it, Padmé would likely never know of this battle. At least not, he amended, until he wished her to. It let him focus on the upcoming battle, the tactics they would need to win and the knowledge that this was no easy sport ahead of him, but an enemy intent on their utter destruction.

Good.

It had been a while since he'd had anyone truly challenge him and it was just the kind of outlet he needed after dealing with his silent and stubborn wife. This was going to be fun.

Month Twenty Four, Day 12 PEF, noon

Author's Note: This was supposed to go out yesterday, but I was driving the back roads and out of town looking for wildlife with my husband as a part of his Birthday celebrations... so I'd apologize, but I'm not sorry this is late as we had a fantastic time even if we were unable to find the Great Gray Owls we were looking for :)

Enjoy!

Edit: I don't normally remove reviews and I would rather leave all options for reviews to the story open as not everyone has an account.

So; as a courtesy to your fellow site user, if you would like to offer *constructive criticism*, please sign your post. Anything without a name that is clearly inflammatory or derogatory (ie: flaming), will be removed. Thanks. -Jade

Chapter 45

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Twelve PEF

Mid-day

Lulls.

Vader *hated* combat lulls.

Back when they'd been fighting the Trade Federation's droid armies, there had never been lulls like this. There had never been the need; droids were tireless — when properly charged — and hadn't needed to regroup or pull back to lick their wounds. They were mindless automatons that came marching quickly and steadily into battle with their sheer numbers, often winning the day.

The battle outside between the fighters was fast and furious with minor damage to the *Exactor*, and two of the four ships he needed eliminated already out of the fight. The first had gone down somewhat easily, to his dismay, but the second had been hard fought. The third and fourth might very well require a fifth and a sixth if the *Exactor* sustained any major damage. Unfortunately, his supply of fighters wasn't limitless and neither were his pilots — but then, neither were their enemies.

Enemies he still hadn't determined the identities of.

With a frown, he paced around the small office that served him while in command. It had been almost twelve hours since the beginning of the engagement — a record for any fleet against his *Exactor* — and the drawn out battle was starting to irritate him. Stuck on the bridge when he'd rather have been at the helm of his fighter had sucked much of the fun from

this endeavor and only caused mountains of frustration when fighter wings failed to perform to his specifications.

“Lord Vader?”

Turning towards the door, he found a nervous Major striving to appear calm — and failing. “What is it now?”

“We’ve just received a report sir; the fleet’s breaking off.”

Vader frowned and the Major took a half step back — except the Sith Lord wasn’t angry; he was confused. “Breaking off?”

“Yes sir. They’ve sustained heavy casualties and are headed for the fifth planet of the system.”

“Have the General set a pursuit course; they’re not to get away.”

“We’re already in pursuit, my Lord, but it will take several hours—”

Vader waved him to silence and the young man blanched — he hardly noticed. Several hours to catch a rag tag band of ships that had ambushed them? His commanders had failed to notify him of the situation and precious minutes had been lost while they debated who to send to him with the news. “Thank you, Major. Return to your station.”

“Yes sir.”

On the heels of the fleeing Major, Vader strode onto the command deck. “Colonel.”

“Ah, Lord Vader,” the man had the gall to smile. “As you can see, the fleet arrayed against us has chosen to flee before our superior might and — urk!”

“They chose to flee and you delayed in the pursuit, wasting valuable time.”

The Colonel clawed at his neck. “I... thought...”

“Never think, Colonel,” Vader advised, snapping the man’s neck with a twitch of his fingers and letting the body drop. Scanning the room, he spied the Major who’d come to find him. In two long strides he was by the pit as the man descended, freezing on the lower rung as Vader appeared in his view.

“Major.”

“My lord?”

“Who plotted the intercept course?”

“I did, sir,” his voice quavered. “But the Colonel didn’t think it was necessary.”

“The Colonel will no longer burden us with his thoughts. Your name, Major.”

“Adams, sir. Connor Adams.”

“Very well; you’ve the deck, Lieutenant Colonel Adams.” Without waiting to see what the reaction to the sudden promotion would be — likely nothing as they happened with frequency — Vader headed for the turbo lift. “Keep me informed, Colonel.”

“Yes sir.”

With the doors closing behind him, Vader selected the level where the main flight deck was located. It not only housed the main attack fighters, but his own and — conveniently — Artoo. Since the beginning of the engagement, Vader had felt a sense of purpose that had gradually declined only to be replaced by a sense of frustration. For all his powers, he was curtailed and limited by the men on his ship.

Wanting nothing more than to be free of the lot of them, or at the very least away from them, Vader ignored the crew as he stepped out into the hangar bay. Bypassing those who would stop to speak with him, he headed straight for a small hangar where Artoo and he spent most of his free time.

Free time that was currently non-existent.

His thoughts turned dark as he reflected on the reasons he’d had precious little free time of late — not that he would normally complain at having Padmé locked in his rooms — but until the night before, she’d been anything but receptive. It didn’t help that when he’d *finally* gotten her into his bed where she belonged, she’d responded as ardently — more! — as ever only to take what they’d shared and vehemently deny it.

As he neared the shop, his steps slowed and a craft he didn’t expect to see caught his eye. The sleek lines belonged to only one other person on the ship and his fists clenched at his sides as he realized something he should have known days ago.

Asajj was here.

Suddenly Padmé’s accusations made a kind of sense they hadn’t before. True, there were no doubt holo records of his encounters with Asajj — possibly with her bent over his desk screaming at him to finish it — but Padmé had no way to use the units that were required to access the security footage. Which meant his apprentice must have informed her personally of something Vader believed she hadn’t needed to know.

Lips tightening in a thin line, Vader bypassed the shop and headed for the adjoining corridors. Ventress would be in one of two places — her quarters or the training salon. Fortunately for him, as he neared the hangar bay door, she made it easy and stepped through the door he’d been a few steps shy of entering. Stopping, he crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

Asajj saw him immediately and pulled up short, her head tilting at a stubborn, prideful angle for a heartbeat before she dipped it in greeting. “Master.”

“Ventress.” She stiffened at his curt greeting. “I was unaware you had returned.”

“My mission concluded more quickly than anticipated.” Taking the last couple of steps to meet him, she glanced around the hangar deck. “I felt it best to return and await further orders.”

Vader’s arm snapped out, his speed enhanced by the Force, and his fingers closed deliberately about her neck. His eyes blazed with orange fire as they narrowed on hers. “Was your trip successful?”

"I've brought you—" mechanical fingers tightened uncomfortably around her neck and Asajj gripped them in an attempt to stall their closing. "-proof!"

"You've a love for several things, Asajj," Vader told her evenly, his tone deceptively conversational. "Killing Jedi and tracking those who have no wish to be tracked. These skills I have a use for."

"What did I—"

"What I *don't* have a use for," he dragged her closer, his fingers tightening ever so slightly and ignoring the way her fingers clawed at his. "Is your wagging tongue!"

Her eyes widened in shock and fear as Vader physically closed off her wind pipe, her hands digging at the leather covered metal of his fingers and gaining no purchase. Spots danced in front of her eyes as she stared at him, the edged of her vision dimming and her feet lashed out, trying to kick him without success. As unconsciousness threatened, and her limbs began to go numb, Vader released her, dropping her to the deck in a heap.

Asajj coughed, her abused throat making sounds like a croaking wheeze, as her body struggled for the oxygen it craved.

Vader knelt next to her, grabbing her face in his hand, his fingers digging painfully into her cheeks even as her breath shuddered in and out. "If you wish to keep it, refrain from using it around my wife." Casting her back to the deck disgustedly, he stared at her for half a heartbeat.

The Force adept lay gasping for breath, fully aware of just how close she'd come to never inhaling another of those precious air molecules ever again. She glanced up at him, hatred visible in the depths of her gaze. "*She* approached *me*." Gasping, she forced herself to speak normally. "It would have been rude to ignore her."

"And you felt obligated to discuss your terms as my apprentice? To *volunteer* information to someone who betrayed you?"

The gleam in Asajj's eyes turned malicious even as her words were deferentially strained. "I simply called her by her proper title now that she is with you; she appeared to take offence."

Vader's tone was deceptively even. "She is no longer a Senator."

"I am aware of her social standing."

"Then what did you call her — and choose your words carefully or your tongue may become permanently attached to the floor."

"Lady Vader."

Vader stared at the Force adept, the appellation ringing through his head and his lips twisted as he recognized the truth of her statement. Padmé *wouldn't* have appreciated the title. "And her title naturally evolved into a discussion of your previous duties as my apprentice."

"I enlightened her to the situation, Master." Hatred shone from the depths of her gaze with great satisfaction. Just by this discussion, Asajj was aware she'd caused further problems

between Vader and his wife — and darkly delighted by it. “No doubt something you would have done had you been here.”

His hand whipped down, cracking her across the face with the back of it and Asajj was thrown to the side, blood dripping from her lip when she was able to push herself back up to look at him.

“Your *motivational* incentives are none of her concern.”

“Two women sharing the same—” Another blow, this time from the other side, struck her, cutting her off and her teeth dug into her lip again.

“Shared; past tense.” His tone turned almost smug, musing but in a superior sort of way. “I have no need for *you* for that with her on board... and I do believe she’d kill you for it — given the opportunity.”

Something about Vader’s tone drew Asajj’s gaze back to his and the meaning in his words was unmistakable. Asajj seethed silently, her displeasure obvious to the Dark Lord as was her conviction she’d driven a wedge between them by that conversation. Vader knew the last thing Asajj would have wanted was to drive him and Padmé together.

“Is she as welcoming as you remember, *Master*?”

Reaching down, he grabbed Asajj by the face and hauled her back to her feet. The crack of bone was audible as something in her skull shifted as pain flooded her features. Vader squeezed slightly and she was forced to focus on him. His blue eyes glittered dangerously, shining with sadistic pleasure.

“Speak with her again; see what happens.”

Asajj hit the deck with a *thump* as Vader threw her towards the door and turned on his heel, speaking over his shoulder. “See Medical, Ventress; you’ll want to be healed for your training session in the morning. This chase should be well over by then.”

Not waiting to see if she’d do as he said, Vader turned back to the hangar deck and surveyed the area. One bold technician waved him down to ask a question about a laser modification on their starfighters. Asajj crept from the deck almost unnoticed.

It wasn’t until she paused in the doorway to glare at Vader’s back and he turned to meet her gaze that she seemed to take the full impact of his statement. A silent shadow, she slipped away to do as he bid and Vader turned back to the technician with grim intent

Asajj would bear watching.

Month Twenty Four, Day 13 PEF

Chapter 46

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Thirteen PEF

Night

"I'm sorry, Lady Vader—"

"*Don't* call me that!"

"—but there is a lockdown in effect and we cannot escort you at this time."

Padmé glared at the head trooper in charge of her security detail. "Why are we in lockdown?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss it, my Lady. I'm certain Lord Vader will inform you when he returns."

"And where is he right now — when will that be?"

"I'm not at liberty to—"

The door shut in his face, cutting him off, and Padmé let out a frustrated growl and turned, stomping towards the kitchenette before stopping and heading for the lounge.

Vader had left early that morning; likely called away to deal with whatever emergency had arisen and left her to her own devices. Since his departure, she'd eaten, showered — finally — and attempted to keep herself busy. Except she was trapped, once again, and now with a mysterious lockdown in effect. The viewports showed they'd been in-system for some time — damaged hyperdrive? — but steadily moving.

Arriving at the lounge, she stared at it as if she'd never seen it before, her perspective of her prison having changed since the night before. Had Vader claimed Asajj here? On the very sofa where she slept? In the bed where they'd— shaking her head to rid it of the thought, she found she was unable to escape it anymore now than she had been since waking this morning.

Her day had been filled with reliving the night before — his accusations and angry words and her own — and the shame of knowing just what had driven her into his arms. True, he'd manhandled her into his bed after she'd left it, but *she* had been the one to succumb to passions first.

It bothered her that she couldn't claim he'd forced her; if anything it had been a mutual forcing — two people who'd once had a claim on the other, blatantly striving to destroy any other claim someone else might have made. Admitting it privately, however, wasn't the same as acknowledging it to *him*— and nothing could make her do that.

Despite her preoccupation, it was nice to have the room to herself once more. If Vader *had* returned she wasn't certain what she would have done. Ignored him again — stabbed him with one of the tables' legs? Strangled him with the sheets on his bed? She didn't know, but if Vader's had the temerity to show his face, she'd have given him a piece of her mind.

It wasn't like him to leave her alone without an indication of where he was going; it wasn't as if she could just contact him via comlink!

Dinner had been a quiet and lonesome affair, much like her breakfast and lunch, except it was also tension filled. What had happened to him? Usually he told her when he was going to be out for an extended period of time; much like when she'd been kept appraised of when he'd next be on Coruscant.

Frowning, she ignored the comparison as she changed into something more comfortable but shapeless before settling herself on the couch for another sleepless night. But it wasn't thoughts of her children that plagued her this night — it was their elusive father.

Where was he?

Irritated she even cared enough to wonder — she should be glad he'd left her in peace and not demanded a repeat of last night's performance despite his promise — she pulled a blanket up to her shoulders. Determined not to think about the callous, irritating, self-absorbed man who shared her cell at his leisure, Padmé closed her eyes to sleep... and was assaulted by images and sensations she wished she could forget.

His naked torso.

His hands caressing her skin.

His bod—

No! Padmé's eyes flew open and she stared sightlessly at the viewport. *Think about something else; all the atrocities he's committed, the lives he's crushed. No matter how good it felt, ignore it. He's not Anakin; he'll never be Anakin!*

Not that it seemed to matter.

He'd *been* Anakin once and now carried all his memories only to use them against her. Vader had known how to touch her, caress her; kiss her. He knew each weakness and exploited it... even as she knew his. And still, despite what had happened between them, the door behind her failed to open and he did not return to the suite.

Irked, she shifted, moving around on the sofa to the far side — an angle that would give her a better view of his bedroom door and his office door in case he came in that way — she tilted her head back against the couch and stared at the ceiling. Silence permeated the room as she stopped moving, slipping in so suddenly she was glaringly aware of it.

Sleep she told herself sternly. *Thinking about Vader serves no purpose. What's done is done; you can't afford to care about anything but Luke and Leia.*

Her children; and she'd slept with their father again.

Frustrated with herself, frustrated with him, irritated she cared enough to be concerned about the fact he hadn't returned, she grabbed a pillow, covered her face and *pressed*...

wishing she could trust herself to scream and not cry.

“Continue firing and recycle the shields.” The command was issued as Vader stepped onto the bridge just shortly before midnight. He’d been down on the flight deck helping ‘motivate’ the supply and repair teams to get the starfighters resupplied for the last five hours and not even the encounter with Ventress had lifted his spirits. If anything, they’d made them worse.

“Update, Captain?”

“We’ve closed with the last of the large ships sir, but it appears as if its sacrificing itself to allow the others to escape.”

“Destroy it; I want no survivors.”

“Yes my Lord.”

“Lieutenant,” he turned his gaze towards one of the fire control officers whose hands were whipping across his board and noted that they didn’t stop under his scrutiny. Either another command candidate or a fool. Few men dared not look him in the eye when he was speaking and — for once — Vader was grudgingly impressed by the man’s duty to his ship and that he kept his gaze on his targeting brackets.

“Yes, Lord Vader?”

“If there are any escape pods launched, eliminate them.”

The hand on the controls faltered for a heartbeat before resuming their confident glide.
“Yes My Lord.”

Turning away, Vader strode across the deck to stop by the main viewport. Folding his hands behind him, he observed the battle, thankful that none of this would be visible from the viewports in his quarters. Much as he disliked the thought of taking Padmé into battle, it had been unavoidable — and she wouldn’t approve of his tactics.

Around him, the ebb and flow of the battle soon turned in their favor and barely fifteen minutes after the engagement began. The other ship began to break apart with escape pods blasting away in several directions.

There was a breath of a pause before they began exploding under the fire of the *Exactor*’sturbolasers. The firing stopped as various fighters swarmed the locations, picking off stragglers and those who sought to flee to the planet below. The turbolasers resumed firing on the wreckage, obliterating the individual deck plates and turning it into a molten pile of slag.

Within minutes the display outside the viewport ceased.

“Sensors.”

There was a moment before the call came from the sensor board. “All clear, my Lord; no life signs.”

“Excellent.” Vader turned from the viewport. “General.”

“Sir?”

“What planet is this?”

“Toydaria, my Lord.”

Toydaria; it meant nothing to Vader except a memory of blue skin, wings and beatings until he could barely walk. Now they’d dared attack him at the pinnacle of his power. As much for past indignities as for now, a cold smile crossed his lips. “Begin planetary bombardment.”

“Planetary... Sir?”

“You have your orders, General.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Vader turned back to the viewport, waiting to see the first of the turbolasers speed towards the planet. It impacted below with a flash beneath the clouds. “Target primary space ports and population centers, General.”

“Understood, my Lord. Shall I preparing the landing craft?”

“This is punishment, General, not occupation; eliminate them. *All* of them.” Vader turned and the look on his face was enough to send the General back a step. Striding past the pompous man, Vader headed towards his bridge office. No matter that this attack was warranted, Vader knew he’d best inform the Emperor of the how and the why before word got back to the puppet senate. “I’m not to be disturbed, General.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

It wouldn’t take long to send the message — about as long as it would take to reduce Toydaria to rubble.

Month Twenty Four, Day 14 PEF

Thanks for reading guys! We appreciate your comments and while I know the story is slow going, but I promise it's advancing at the pace we intended. Trauma and mistrust aren't things that are quick to change, especially in this instance.

And now a little glimpse into the twisted working of Vader's mind... and his relationship with Artoo *smirk* I love this chapter :D

Chapter 47

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Fourteen PEF

Early Morning

Toydarian resistance was stiffer than expected and the *Exactor* was forced to break off its assault to defend itself against the remnants of the armada and its supplemented ground based forces. Hard pressed to complete the assault without risking permanent damage, they withdrew to bring the fleet with them and away from the planet's defenses.

Vader was forced to return to the hangar deck to provide stimulating motivation for the crews once again and to eliminate dissenting pilots who refused to rejoin the battle. His mere presence seemed to push them to excel and those few who noted he appeared irritated thought twice before opening their mouths to voice concerns. Those who *didsay* something either chose their words carefully or never spoke again.

It was here, as he was un-jamming of one of the lifters that would help get the ships by using the Force that his gaze fell on the workshop he'd been headed for earlier when Asajj had distracted him. The surge of longing for peace after the last intense hours — days — was almost overwhelming.

The General had his orders, the Emperor had sanctioned the move against Toydaria and was sending a task force led by Tarkin — a man Vader knew was more than capable of running the operation — and other than the small resistance and heavy planetary defenses they faced, his time was his own as soon as this problem was corrected. Except it wasn't, because the haven he'd created in his chambers was now a roiling den of animosity and frustration.

Only the workshop where Artoo spent most of his time held any kind of sanctuary and while Vader hadn't been back to his quarters since leaving them the previous day — or had much time to dwell on Padmé's revelations — he knew he needed to organize his thoughts before seeing her again. If he didn't, he wasn't sure he'd be capable of controlling whatever emotional turbulence time to think and focus would bring.

Jerking the pieces of the lifter free from its metal trap, Vader let it drop for the operators and turned away. Sure strides had him crossing the deck as he keyed his comlink. "General."

"Yes, Lord Vader?"

"How much time before the rest of the fleet arrives?"

"Two hours, my Lord."

"I will contact you then," he flipped off his comlink and stuffed it into his belt as he stopped outside the shop. Keying in the override to the security system, Vader stepped in. Artoo tooted a greeting from where he was soldering a connection underneath one of the fighter's wings. Just seeing his friend brought a smile to Vader's face, and the stress of the last few days immediately began to bleed off. This was something he could focus on without having to worry about the greater galactic picture.

Tinkering was a release he'd long denied himself.

"It's good to see you too, Artoo," Vader locked the door behind him as he stepped towards his friend and the workbench along one wall. "It's been too long."

A raspberry of a sound blatted his way.

"I know, I know it's my own fault, and I'm not sorry I didn't take you with me to Coruscant."

Swiveling his dome, the little droid sang an inquiry.

"Yes, it was really that bad. I think he knows."

Sparks stopped flying as Vader leaned against the wall with his workbench, crossing his arms and his feet as Artoo regarded him with his optical lens in silence, as if understanding Vader's concern. He finally spoke the question Vader knew he couldn't answer — but tried anyway.

"That's the thing; I'm not even sure what he knows, if anything, or if he was just trying to get me to give something up." With a frustrated sigh, Vader shook his head. "It would be just like him too."

Artoo agreed heartily, going back to his soldering.

"What're you working on?"

A complicated series of beeps and whistles ensued as Vader rolled his shirt sleeves back and stripped off his gloves. They were set near the door, his smile widening as Artoo finished his explanation. "A shielding upgrade? Where'd you find that?"

Another series of complex beeps and whistles.

"Ah." It figured the Emperor hadn't said much regarding personal shielding technology for starfighters in their meeting. Though... he might have considering how distracted Vader had been. "Well, let's never say that the Empire doesn't provide. Show me what you've done so far, would you?"

Stretching out on the deck plating, Vader hauled himself beneath the ship to examine Artoo's handiwork. Using his grappling arm, the droid explained the complicated crossovers and relay upgrades he'd been working on for the past several days. As a testament to his diligence, the inside of the starfighter's sensor wiring was nothing like what Vader remembered.

"Last several days?" Looking at his oldest friend, Vader arched his eyebrows. "Just how many is 'several', Artoo?"

A quick twitter accompanied Vader's hand as it braced on the side of the panel for him to get a better view. "Six days?" echoing the reply, Vader shook his head. "Why didn't you tell me? I'd have given you a hand."

A query met his question.

"Why wouldn't I?" Vader reached for a hydrospanner to pull off the panel adjacent to the one Artoo had been working on. "Just because Padmé is here, doesn't mean I don't have time for you."

Artoo chittered, the droid equivalent of a laugh.

"That's *not* funny — it's true. If she had her way," he pried the panel off, 'I'd have nothing *but* time. Sometimes I think she'd prefer it if I just disappeared completely.' A frustrated shake of his head brought the next panel off. "What the hell happened to her, Artoo? I mean, she used to be so... so easy to get along with. So *eagerto* see me, and now that we can spend all of our time together, I might as well be living with a stranger who wears her face."

Unconsciously, he acknowledged the same argument she'd been throwing at him for the last two weeks — except she wasn't a stranger. Beneath everything, she was the same woman he married; he knew it with every fiber of his being. She was simply... different. But then with everything she'd been through the last two years, it was no wonder she'd changed some. It was just that he didn't particularly *likesome* of those changes.

The droid was suspiciously silent as Vader continued, examining the connecting wires that fed the shields into the power couplings. Based on Artoo's upgrades, he'd have to replace these before he dared use the shields otherwise he'd blow the couplings — they weren't rated for the kind of power the upgrade suggested.

"I used to think it would be simple once she was with me, except she's harder now than when we were first married. Cold even... but as passionate as ever. She wants me as much as she ever did... I don't get it." Vader told his friend, his gaze focused on his work as the silence of his companion soothed him like nothing else could; Artoo *always* understood and never judged. He twisted the hydrospanner across one of the connectors, releasing the power coupling to drop into his other hand. "If she'd just give me a chance, she'd see I'm the same man she married and all this nonsense would disappear."

In impudent blat wiped the smile from Vader's lips.

"If she'd cooperate just a little with me, I'd—"

The little astromech cut him off, spinning his dome in indignation and rattling off something in droid speak that Vader had no trouble following — to his dismay.

“I didn’t—”

Another scolding chitter

“She’s *not*unhap—”

Tension mounted in his shoulders as he slapped the power coupling and hydrospaner on the deck and shoved himself out from under the fighter, the droid not letting him get a word in edgewise.

“If I want a lecture on how to treat my wife, I’d—”

Cutting him off once again, Artoo extended his arc welder and snapped off a series of rude sounding sounds even as a beam of light arched towards the Sith lord. Completely unprepared for the assault, Vader overbalanced in trying to get away and rocked backwards.

“*Artoo!*”

Finally settled and having said his piece, Artoo let out a mournful wail. Turning his optic sensors back to the fighter, he went back to work and soldered together another connection. He made a couple of half-hearted sounds before going completely silent and becoming absorbed in his task.

Braced with his hands behind him, Vader stared at the little droid, having been completely unprepared for his outburst. Or the lesson he’d just been handed. Few creatures in the galaxy would dare treat him as Artoo just had — except the little droid wasn’t just his co-pilot, he was his best friend. And, as all best friends did, had volunteered his opinion.

An opinion Vader didn’t much like.

He should be *nicerto* Padmé — did Artoo have a loose wire somewhere?

Vader was as nice as he could possibly be and still be himself; he hadn’t pushed her into anything she didn’t want, hadn’t forced her to his bed — if one didn’t count their wrestling match of the other morning; which *had* been mutual — and yet he also hadn’t been as *nice* as he could have. She tired his patience at every turn and he rose to her challenge. He’d learned much, but not enough, of how she’d spent her time the last two years and learned he felt utterly helpless — and hated it — when it came their children and the impact the separation was having on her. But, despite the fact they were fighting almost constantly, at least they were communicating.

But the other point Artoo had been forceful upon was Padmé’s happiness — or rather, lack thereof. Padmé unhappy? Grudgingly, Vader could admit to it. She’d repeatedly asked for freedom and he’d denied her; he had no choice if he was to keep her safe and it hurt *him* to do it. Despite his lofty rank as the Emperor’s Apprentice, he could still well remember the bite of the whip as it lacerated his flesh and the knowledge that someone else controlled his freedom. He’d not abused her as his masters did him, surely she didn’t think of herself a slave... did she?

Shifting, Vader stayed where he was, watching his little friend in quiet contemplation.

Was Artoo right? Did Padmé feel the victim in this, caught in circumstances beyond her control. Grudgingly, he admitted he’d deliberately curtailed her freedoms and isolated her from the rest of the galaxy, but he was simply trying to keep her from harm. Surely she could

see this was all in her best interest; without *him* she stood next to no chance of finding their children. Without *him* they wouldn't exist in the first place; not that she'd admitted as much.

Artoo tootled a query.

"No, Artoo; I'm not going to have you melted down for slag." Pushing to his feet, Vader dusted off his pants. "You're entitled to your opinion; it's part of the reason you've never undergone a memory wipe. I think you're wrong, though. Padmé's unhappy because the Alliance stole our children and refused to give them back, much less tell her where they are. She's unhappy because she's used to certain freedoms and I can't yet give her those; for her own protection."

A rude noise was his response.

"Now wait just a second, I never said I *liked* keeping her in my quarters all the time! Why do you think I gave her a security detail?"

Artoo retracted his arc welder, but didn't close the panel, and turned completely to face Vader with another rude noise. He chittered and snapped, the sound a mess of discordant notes that made Vader frown.

"You're *wrong*, Artoo. I didn't do it for me; I did it for her. She never liked being unable to walk around free." Another harsh reprimand blasted his way and Vader finally had enough. Reaching for his gloves, he jerked them back on with angry, irritated motions. "Think what you want, but Padmé is my wife; I'm responsible for seeing to her safety and will do whatever is necessary to keep her from harm. If that means curtailing her freedom until the threats are gone, so be it!"

Energy arched from the welder as Artoo extended it his way, zapping Vader in the leg and making him jump. Vader stepped out of range, but the little droid followed, zapping him again with an irritated series of beeps and squeals.

"Stop it Artoo!"

He declined with a blat, zapping Vader again.

"You know as well as I do she'll never stay if given the choice. Would you prefer to have some bounty hunter catch her, or the Emperor do away with her the moment—"

A question cut him off and Vader, near the door, paused before reaching for the controls, looking down at the astromech.

"I don't know, Artoo. I may have no choice but to keep her here indefinitely. If her attitude changes, I *might* be able to give her more freedoms — within reason and with tightened security — but that will depend on her. If you want to see her continued safety and good health, you'd do well to help me convince her of that."

Artoo was suspiciously silent as Vader unlocked the door and left the shop, heading for the bridge and the demands of command. Tinkering with Artoo would serve no purpose and his discussion with the little droid had done little more than reinforce his conviction that he do whatever necessary to keep Padmé safe — no matter her opinion on the matter.

Once this crisis was over, he'd have to figure out a way to deal with her again and, while he was looking forward to claiming his husbandly rights, he had no illusions as to what frame

of mind he'd left his wife in. The confrontation that awaited him would not be pretty — but maybe, just maybe, if he was away long enough, he might avoid it for a bit.

But then, there were a couple other matters to tend to first; the completion of the Toydarian's destruction and the lesson Asajj required for wagging her tongue at his wife in ways that were none of her concern. One, he hoped to finish before the other; if he didn't, so be it.

Month Twenty Four, Day 15 PEF, morning

Chapter 48

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Fifteen PEF

Padmé's attempts to leave the suite the previous day had once again been denied by the deferential trooper with a very polite, "I'm sorry, Lady Vader; lockdown is still in effect."

She'd spent the day frustrated, knowing she shouldn't take her anger out on the man for simply doing his job, and reigned in her temper to politely request that he inform her immediately when lockdown was completed. He assured her that either he, or his replacement, would be on hand to do so. That call had never come and she'd been denied the walk she so craved.

Left once again at loose ends, she'd spent the day pacing the suite, unable to eat despite the twist of hunger in her gut. Food had held little to no appeal; not when Vader *might* return any minute and force the confrontation she was dreading.

That fear was for naught.

Vader didn't return for a second night — and she knew because she'd been unable to sleep in the hush of the room, buffered from the outside influences in such a cocoon of silence she wanted to scream. Worry and concern had dissolved into irritation with Vader's continued silence as to his whereabouts. Exhaustion had frayed her temper when she pushed away from the viewport, aware that the ship appeared to have entered orbit around a planet she couldn't see. The way the star system's primary star moved in such an obvious daily rotation indicated geosynchronous orbit — but it was a fleeting interest.

No matter what planet they were over for whatever reason, she wasn't allowed to leave the room... and it chafed.

Striding past the kitchenette, her stomach rumbled, making its desire to eat known only to dissolve into suffocating knots that would have quelled any attempt at ingesting sustenance. Ignoring it, she went straight to the door and palmed the panel open. The same trooper from the last two days turned to face her respectfully.

"Lady Vader."

"I asked you not to call me that." The words practically lashed him, making him straighten to a stiff attention, as he took the full brunt of her irritability.

"Lord Vader has insisted your proper title be used at all times, my Lady."

Surprisingly, she let the statement pass. "You've been in contact with him?"

"Yes, ma'am," he clicked his heels together. "An hour ago. Lockdown has been rescinded for the time being."

Folding her arms over her chest, Padmé pinned him with a frosty look. “And your promise to me?”

“I didn’t wish to wake you, my Lady,” his tone was completely deferential and apologetic. “You look as if you need the sleep.”

“Let me worry about that Commander,” her vanity was pricked by the statement, but getting out of the room was more important than her appearance. “Summon the detail; I wish to go walking.”

“Immediately, my Lady — but it will take a few minutes. Shall I inform you the moment we’re assembled?”

“And not a second later.”

He clicked his heels together again as the door shut in his face. Knowing it would take a few minutes to gather the men who consisted of her guard, Padmé headed for the ‘fresher. It wasn’t because she was expecting to run into Vader, she told herself firmly as she brushed out her hair and did her teeth. It was because she felt as if she hadn’t slept in a week and apparently looked it. After the trooper’s comment, she needed the mental boost.

It certainly *wasn’t* because she wanted to look good for one blue-eyed man.

Still, staring back at her from the looking glass was a gaunt, strained face she barely recognized as her own. She’d lost weight since being brought on board; more than was likely healthy, and an attack of sudden vanity made her wonder what anyone saw when they looked at her. A quick, critical look at herself left her shocked with what she saw.

Bruises under her eyes with her skin stretched slightly more taught across her cheek bones than before with the beginnings of sunken hollows where flesh was starting to disappear.

A frown crossed her lips and she slapped the side of the looking glass, folding it away so she wouldn’t have to look at her image. How could *anyone* find her attractive was beyond her — not that she wanted *him* to find her attractive. The man didn’t even have the decency to tell her how long he’d be gone!

Pushing thoughts of Vader aside, Padmé finished to freshen up without looking in the looking glass again, putting the reflection of herself out of her mind and focusing instead on what was to come; the walk she needed so very badly to be able to expend the pent up energy being trapped in this room had generated. Something akin to anticipation flooded her veins as she exited the ‘fresher.

Bare minutes later, there was a polite knock on the door and Padmé opened it to find her quartet of guards awaiting her. Without waiting for their usual question of where she wished to go, she exited the room and began walking. Silently, as if sensing the walk itself was more important than the destination, they fell in around her. Ignoring them as best she was able, Padmé set a determined pace.

Determined to walk off the tension in her frame

Determined to vent the feel of once again being chattel and convenient; a kept woman.

Determined to ignore the worry in her gut for being left alone for such a long period of time after such singular and all consuming attentions.

Determined to escape the knowledge that the longer she remained in captivity, the less likely she was of ever seeing her children again.

It was an exercise in futility — but she tried anyway.

Another long lull in the ever increasingly draw out and frustrating combat left Vader with enough time to duck back into his quarters shortly before the lunch hour to check on his wife. Entering through the connecting door to his private office, he'd hoped to surprise her — only to find silence greeted him.

A quick check of the suite, including his chambers, showed that Padmé was nowhere to be found.

Hands on his hips, he surveyed the suite while sorting through conflicting emotions. Relief and irritation vied for attention. Relief because a part of him was dreading what he knew would be an... *interesting* conversation — if she wasn't still intent on giving him the silent treatment — and irritation because he hadn't seen her for the better part of the last two days and he'd been looking forward to her company; no matter her mood. Just seeing her, being around her, would have been enough.

Pushing the thought away, he exited into the corridor to confirm his suspicion of her location and wasn't disappointed. The guard was missing; she and her security detail were gone.

Pulling his comlink from his belt, he keyed up the frequency of the commander of her unit.

"Yes, my Lord?"

"Your location?"

"Sub-section E, sir. Shall we return?"

His immediate reaction was to insist upon it and only the idea that Padmé would no doubt *love* that held his tongue. The sense of her relief now that she was free of his quarters wasn't an exact marker of her location, but it gave him pause and made him realize that returning her prematurely to his side wouldn't be doing himself any favors. Exhaling his frustration, he managed to keep it from his voice. "That won't be necessary, Commander. Continue your circuit."

"Yes sir."

Flicking off the comlink, he frowned, his reluctance to call them back to the suite leaving him at loose ends. Idly he considered her location; sub-section E — near the trooper's galley area. Perhaps the Commander would convince her to stop for a bite — if he was lucky.

Without the distraction Padmé had promised to provide, his thoughts turned back to the situation on Toydaria. It was anything *but* to his liking, and it chafed that it continued to drag on this long. Yes, the fleet had arrived, but the bombardment from orbit hadn't had the effect desired — except to free up some of his time. Toydarian resistance was strong. He shouldn't be surprised; Watto had been a stubborn and resourceful cretin. Why should his race be any different?

Changing the frequency of his comlink he turned it back on and settled for his second choice of distraction. “Ventress.”

“Yes, *Master?*”

“The training salle; five minutes.”

She wasn’t given a chance to respond as he flicked the comlink off, putting it away, and strode purposefully towards the salle. With Padmé out wandering the corridors on the other side of the deck from the training salle, he could teach Asajj some manners and expend some frustration. After having to cancel their training session the morning before — Asajj’s jaw had been damaged enough in his assault she’d required almost twelve hours to mend the damage — he was looking forward to this session.

Despite her obvious inferiority, Asajj’s pride forced her to rise to each challenge he presented in the hope of besting him. Perhaps someday in the distant future she’d be his rival or perhaps even his equal; but that day was not today.

And it was time he reminded her of that.

Twice around the deck of the ship and through the now familiar corridors wasn’t enough for Padmé.

They returned slightly after noon to Vader’s quarters, but after having spent the better part of the last two weeks cooped up inside — not to mention the events of two nights ago — Padmé was loathe to return. Bypassing the doors, she ignored the slight hesitation of her guard detail as she pivoted on the ball of her foot and started around the deck once more. It would take just over an hour and a part of her was wishing for stairs of some kind. Something, anything, to increase the level of physical activity and give her an outlet for this simmering frustration.

Having calmed down some, but not completely, Padmé took the opportunity to walk with the Commander of her guard this time, asking questions about the locations and areas on the deck she wondered if she’d have access too.

“The last area we passed on the way back to your quarters was our gym, my Lady,” he told her with a nod back towards where they’d come from. “This way holds several rooms Lord Vader keeps for his personal training.”

“A training salle?”

“Of course. Our barracks are on the other side of the ship near the mess hall I pointed out to you earlier.”

“And this?”

He directed her away from the hallway they’d traveled on their first loop through the deck. “Personal quarters for the most part; very little of interest.”

“But not yours?”

“We’re more comfortable in our barracks, my Lady; personal quarters are better left for those who require their personal space.”

Which implied of course, that they didn’t. Padmé frowned. “Everyone needs their personal space, Commander; even a soldier as dedicated as you. One might say, especially a soldier as dedicated as you.”

Tactfully, he deflected the comment and changed the subject. “Lord Vader’s personal series of rooms for training are coming up on the left; he keeps a selection of weapons—”

A muffled crash cut him off, drawing Padmé’s gaze to the nearest door just as they were passing by it. A muffled, angry retort followed, and Padmé had no problem recognizing Asajj’s scathing tones. Vader’s voice, close on its heels, sent a bolt of emotion through her system.

He’d not sought her out; he’d not even had the courtesy of telling her where he would be or for how long, and he’d come searching for Asajj?

Asajj’s cry of pain was unmistakable through the door and Padmé reacted before she thought, spinning to face it and slapping her palm against the activation plate. She didn’t even see the tableau before her as she barreled in; instead she was seeing Asajj’s bruises in her mind’s eye — and remembering how she’d gotten them. Incensed beyond reason, she was several steps into the salle before the image before her registered completely.

Vader and Asajj were on the ground, his hand pinning Asajj to the mat — but that was the only part of him touching her as she lay face-down, obviously beaten, with his lightsaber across her shoulders. They turned to look at her in obvious surprise and Vader straightened slowly, releasing Asajj and shutting down his lightsaber.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I could ask your the same thing, wife.”

Padmé tilted her chin up defiantly. “I heard the sounds of a struggle.”

“So you naturally barged in, without a weapon, to rescue the poor soul.” His eyes glittered with amusement. “Or perhaps to join them?”

Padmé cast a glance at Asajj, noting the Force adept was rubbing her wrists, but appeared to be otherwise unharmed. Vader didn’t appear to have forced her submission once again. Bile rose in the back of her throat at the thought, despising herself for thinking it — and for caring.

Vader followed her gaze — and felt her inner turmoil. “Ah. I see.”

“I very much doubt it.”

“Not to worry, Padmé,” he stepped towards her, “I’ve no use for her or anyone else in my bed when you fill it so nicely.”

“Filled, past tense!”

Reaching out to grasp her hand, Vader tightened his grip when she made to pull away, and deliberately pulled her towards him. “Feeling neglected, my love?”

Padmé struggled against his grip, but his arm was like an iron band as it slid around her waist, preventing her escape. The security detail had disappeared — presumably outside — leaving her with Vader and Asajj — and Asajj was a corner she expected no help from. She tossed her head, feeling guilty heat flood her cheeks even as she denied it, her hands pressing against his chest.

“By you? Never.”

“For a politician, you were never any good at lying.” Without warning, his tone turned silky smooth and his hand released hers to brush his fingers against her cheek. “I should never have let you leave my bed once I had you back in it; I much prefer to hear you screaming my name as you did the yesterday night.”

Aware that Asajj was hanging on his every word, Padmé glared at him. Humiliation had long since crept in to fuel her anger, and her high color did nothing to hide it. He was deliberately ensuring that Asajj knew of her fall; enjoying using her bodily reactions against him — for she’d stopped struggling only to stand trembling in his grasp. Tossing her head again, she broke the contact of his fingers against her skin.

And Vader’s lips covered hers.

The kiss was as just shy of bruising, his fingers bracketing one side of her mouth to keep her from turning him aside; and she tried. Turning this way and that, Vader’s lips caught and held hers; refusing to relinquish them for the long moments it took her to respond.

And, inevitably, she did.

No matter how much she didn’t wish to, her body and lips remembered his; remembered the pleasure they’d always brought; remembered the bliss her mind craved but found so elusive. These factors and more worked against her even as she reluctantly kissed him back, her fingers tangling in the material of his shirt as they tightened into fists.

“So much for not wanting him.”

Breaking the kiss, Vader cast Asajj a menacing glare at her spiteful interjection and the Force Adept, who’d retreated towards the door during their exchange, escaped before she could be brought to task.

Mortified by her actions and reactions, Padmé tore herself free of Vader’s grasp as his attention was momentarily split, and backed away. She couldn’t blame Asajj; the fault was her own and her body’s treacherous weakness when it came to the man before her.

“It’s a little later to be playing the indignant victim, don’t you think?”

Wiping the back of her hand across her lips, Padmé struggled to clear her head and the anger surging through her veins gave her strength. She opened her mouth to respond, but nothing came out as nothing came to mind. Vader’s smug expression struck her low in the chest, like an open-fisted blow. The knowledge that she’d *participated* in that kiss was like a festering wound.

“That’s what I thought,” he stepped forward and she backed away, making his eyes snap in annoyance. Grasping her arm, he pulled her from the training salle and back into the hallway before releasing her towards her entourage of guards. “There are better uses for your ire, as

we discovered two nights ago; perhaps I should remind you of them after I remind Asajj of her manners?”

“Don’t do me any favors.”

“Favors, my love?” he bent down, capturing her lips with his in a surprise move that was hard and fast, releasing her almost as quickly as he’d claimed her. “I’ll have you do me one later.”

A sound of outraged frustration passed her lips as Vader turned and walked away. Spinning on her heel, Padmé stormed back through the corridors towards his chambers without thinking, sweeping inside without dismissing her security detail. Once inside, the frustrated sound erupted as she turned and struck the door with her open palms, wishing all the while it was the blue-eyed monster who’d humiliated her in the hallway.

Arrogant, pompous, high-handed, frustrating... *jerk!*

Exhaling, Padmé took in her surroundings and was suitably appalled that she’d returned here to vent her frustrations. If there was anywhere she didn’t wish to be, it was within these rooms. Vader could return at any moment, intent on making good on his promise — or would he only do that after making good on his threat against Asajj? Deal with one woman before the other? Teach manners before collecting favors?

Not that he’d get any from her.

Smacking the door with open palms, she couldn’t put the image of his glittering eyes as he’d promised retribution on Asajj — and for what? Because Asajj had spoken the truth? Unease slid down her spine with the realization that whatever Vader chose to do to Asajj would be on her head. While she hadn’t initiated the kiss, she’d been unable to stop it once it had begun... and powerless to resist his allure.

Despite what Asajj had done to her, the Force adept didn’t deserve to suffer whatever consequences Vader would throw her way; she deserved to be prepared.

Pressing her hand against the switch before she could change her mind, Padmé strode back into the hallway to find her guard had not yet dispersed. Ignoring them, she brushed beyond their loose formation and headed for the training salle. With Vader’s threat firmly in mind, worry crept in and drove her to a fast walk; would she be able to find and warn Asajj of Vader’s intent before he found her? Without any real idea of where to find Asajj’s quarters, and discounting her escorts as having any such knowledge, Padmé hoped to get some indication of where she needed to go simply by walking the same corridors. If she was lucky, she wouldn’t have to go knocking on doors and she’d find the Force adept in the hallways as before.

Luck was on her side — but not in the fashion she’d expected.

As she was crossing the threshold of the corridors that the Commander had earlier pointed out as leading to quarters, the sound of twisting metal drew her up short. Not a moment later, a door she couldn’t see opened down the corridor and the figure of the Force adept came hurtling out to slam bodily into the opposite wall.

Stunned, Padmé drew up short.

As if in slow motion, Asajj's body seemed to turn inwards, her legs losing their ability to hold her upright even as she collapsed, crumbling to the floor in a heap. Her skirt pooled around her even as her hands stretched out to catch her fall, pain obvious on the partial profile her features. Pale skin was flushed, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth that Padmé could see.

Vader appeared from the direction of Asajj's impromptu flight, his whole posture screaming aggression and intent and a chill chased its way down Padmé's spine as she watched, unable to turn away. A glimpse of his face as he bent to pluck Asajj from the ground by wrapping his hand about her neck, revealed his eyes glowing yellow with anger and hatred.

Padmé's throat closed, as if in silent empathy, for what she was witnessing, the feel of those ghostly fingers he'd once wrapped around her throat making it hard for her to catch her breath. Except she was watching as he tightened mechanical fingers, finger Asajj clawed at in an effort to breathe, and not him use his powers as an extension of himself.

"I warned you to watch your tongue when speaking about Padmé."

The deadly promise in his words sliced through her lethargy with the precision of a knife, releasing her from the spell she seemed to have been under, and Padmé charged in without thinking. Her security detail forgotten and her voice freed, the suffocating feeling gone, her demand tore ragged loose from her lips.

"Stop it! Leave her alone!"

Surprise registered first on Vader's expression, the yellow light in his eyes flickering as they beheld her and fading away as she came at him. A slightly horrified, guilty expression flitted across his face — as if he couldn't believe he'd been caught — but was gone in the same instant. In that same moment, his gaze flicked to her surprised security detail, to the woman hanging from his grasp — and his fingers opened, dropping Asajj to the floor. It was all the notice he gave the Force adept before his gaze met that of the banshee flying his way.

"Padmé."

Her name on his lips was like a trigger and Padmé dove at him with a scream. *"Get away from her!"* Anger twisted her face into a mask of frightening intensity, and surprise more than anything drove him back as she slammed both hands into his chest. *"You monster!"*

As if loosed from the very bowels of the hell that had spawned the darkness within Vader, Padmé's rage and helplessness translated into a second strike, pushing him back another step even as he belatedly lifted his hands to protect himself from her fury. But she wouldn't be stopped.

"Fiend!" Padmé's hands curled into fists with her third strike, slamming through his half-hearted defenses and driving into his chest as she crowded him against the wall opposite from Asajj. "You're worse now than you ever were on Mustafar!"

"Cold," her accusation sliced through the silence as she followed it up with another strike. 'Callous!' Her hands flew in from the side again. "Heart-less miscreant!"

From the floor across the way, Asajj's head rung and spun with the abuses she'd been enduring until just moments ago; ones she would have still been suffering if not for help from

an unexpected quarter. Padmé's angry tones were garbled, not quite clear, but there was no mistaking the tone in which she spoke them.

Scathing

Hurtful.

Incensed.

Lifting her gaze, Asajj took in the tableau before her — and if she'd had the breath to do so, would have laughed. Padmé had a very stunned looking Vader pinned against the far wall, her words dropping about his head like a curse — and a benediction to Asajj's ears. The ringing slowly faded as Padmé's fury seemed to lose some of its steam, her words finally registering in Asajj's mind in some form of coherent thought.

“—ever touch me again!”

And, no matter what pleasure Asajj had received from Vader's dressing down — for there was nothing else to call it — those finally words of Padmé's froze in her chest and hardened. Padmé's 'rescue' had come too little, too late and whatever enjoyment she'd received with watching the show, faded to nothing.

Unaware of the Force adept's thoughts behind her, Padmé glared at Vader and pushed him back against the wall with both palms flat on his chest. He'd made no move to defend himself, presumably because he either couldn't — unlikely — or because he didn't know what he *could* say to assuage her anger. As if there was anything.

Having seen him choking Asajj and intervening had been not only horrifying, but — in some ways — liberating, for she'd finally had the chance to give voice to her anger with his tactics. Tactics, it seemed, that he hadn't only used on her. It had been a way to finally face up to that fear and blast the man responsible — for he had indeed been Vader at the beginning of her tirade and, fortunately, she'd not lost sight of that fact even after his eyes had faded to stunned blue.

Nodding once, certain he finally understood her opinion of him and his abuse of the woman who'd formally been her friend, Padmé turned on the ball of her foot and crossed the hall to crouch next to Asajj. Ignoring the hatred glittering in the Force adept's eyes, she did a visual once-over of Asajj's still crumpled form. “Are you alright?”

Asajj remained stoically silent, her gaze drifting back to the man who claimed to be her Master. Vader was still staring at his wife in silent incredulity, obviously sorting through the myriad of accusations she had thrown his way. His gaze bore into her back even as Padmé kept her gaze on the Force adept.

“Asajj?” Reaching out, Padmé gripped one muscular forearm and attempted to help her to her feet, “Can I help—”

“Get your hands off me!” Asajj's response was violent and bitter, exploding the moment the word 'help' left Padmé's lips. “I don't need help from a whore!”

Startled, Padmé was unprepared for the brutality of Asajj's reaction. Caught off balance, she was easy prey as Asajj tore her arm free and *pushed*. The familiar sensation of being caught in the grip of the Force enveloped Padmé for several drawn out seconds, the hatred

and malice in Asajj's eyes the last thing she saw as the force of the push propelled her into the wall, knocking the side of her face and temple hard against the corner.

Pain exploded through Padmé's skull and darkness immediately followed.

Month Twenty Four, Day 15 PEF, evening

Chapter 49

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Fifteen PEF

Several Hours later

Softness.

Padmé's first impression was softness beneath her, cradling her even as a dull throb of her head made itself known. Her head lay on a pillow in a very precise fashion, as if cradling her head in a purposefully made divot. The side of her face ached and her brows drew together as she couldn't place exactly why she hurt.

Slowly, her eyes fluttered open, but the dim light of the room was shielded by a body lying next to her. A very warm and very familiar body. Focus came slowly, starting with a wild riot of long hair she'd have known blindfolded and followed by the strong features and azure blue eyes... the eyes of the man she'd married.

He lay beside her, his expression serious and guarded, his head propped on one arm and blocking the light from reaching her eyes. His face was shadowed, but she didn't need light to know it; she'd memorized it years ago with finger tip, lips and tongue.

Pain arced through the side of her face as she opened her mouth to speak, her mind still fogged from the blow she didn't remember taking. Something about the situation didn't click, but that didn't stop his name from softly escaping.

"Ani."

A rueful smile crossed his lips, as if acknowledging the irony of her appellation — one she didn't fully understand. "Shh," she lay still as his free hand lifted, gently stroking the side of her face that didn't throb — coincidentally the side closest to him. "Relax, Padmé."

"Wha—"

"You hit that wall pretty hard" he continued to stroke the backs of his fingers over her cheek, searching her expression while keeping his own carefully neutral. "And you've a nasty bruise on the side of your face."

Memory return with staggering force.

The fingers that touched her so gently, had been wrapped around Asajj's pale throat; the menace in him as he'd closed on Asajj; the yellow tint to his eyes and the way he'd radiated malevolence; the pure *malice* in his words as he'd spoke to the Force adept.

Not Anakin, her Ani — but Vader.

Shadows darkened her eyes and she knew he knew because his expression closed impossibly further as she turned her head away, flinching as it put pressure on her bruised cheek but broke the contact between them. Physical pain was preferable to the emotional turmoil created by his touch.

Self-preservation reared its head and the sensible voice in the back of her head demanded she move. That sensible voice she'd been following for so long, the one that urged her now to flee, to leave Vader's bed no matter her physical state. To leave before he could turn her physical responses against him — and the voice faded slightly as his hand settled with the heel on her sternum. A touch she wished to break, but, no matter how much she wished to, Padmé knew she couldn't. Exhaustion coupled with the emotional and physical strains of the last few days had drained her almost completely.

Even as she lay there, Vader's hand on her chest, staring off to the side to avoid his gaze, she couldn't help but wonder how she'd come to be here. The events leading up to her awakening here had come back with very little clarity; but she did remember having turned to assess Asajj's injuries... and the Force adept's violent reaction. Moistening her lips proved painful and the throbbing in her face made speaking difficult, but she was nothing if not determined.

"Asajj."

"Do you remember hitting the wall?"

"No."

The fingers supporting his head bent and traced a line on the unblemished side of her face. "You struck about here — on the other temple. Another inch lower and you might never have woken up; you've been out cold for hours."

A chill raced through her at his words. "Hours?"

"She threw you pretty hard."

The images came back with his words, disjointed visions that played like a holo in her mind. Vader advancing on Asajj; the Force adept's struggle to free herself; her limp form as she'd hit the ground. Shifting, she rolled slightly and was rewarded with a sharp pain through the side of her body, making her wince. It was enough to deter her from a full roll, and Vader's hand slid as she moved, coming to a rest cupping her hip when she stopped.

Her lips cracked when she spoke, and she couldn't hide the bitterness from her voice — didn't so much as try. "She threw me like you threw her; the only difference is she didn't choke me."

His fingers flexed on her hip, digging in to force her back onto her back to look at him. There was no mistaking the annoyance in his expression. "I told her to watch what she said about you. I will not have my apprentice insulting my wife."

"So you choke her." A shudder raced through her as she glared at him. "I don't even want to know what you did to her after she called me a whore."

Vader's eyes flared with suppressed anger, "You are not a whore. And I did nothing to her." Yet he told himself silently. "My top priority was getting you back here and making sure

you're okay."

Their gazes locked for a half second before she deliberately turned her gaze away again and rolled back to her previous position, doing her best to ignore the hand he left on her hip. "As you can see, I'm fine"

Silence fell.

Awkward tension permeated the room like a thick smoke, enveloping them in a cocoon of unease. Vader's hand remained stubbornly where it was, as if its presence alone could defy the feeling. Long moments passed as Padmé silently willed him to go away and leave her in peace, her throbbing face demanding relief she couldn't give until he was gone. His subdued tone, several long minutes later, surprised her.

"I never wanted you to see anything like that."

A laugh bordering on hysterical caught in her throat. Was he serious? Did he really expect that she wouldn't see something like that being stuck on this ship in close quarters with him? Did he honestly expect her illusions of him to have remained intact after everything they'd been through, everything they'd discussed? There was a hard edged of spite in her tone when she finally replied. "Why? It's not that different from what you did to me. The only difference this time is that I got to see someone else be on the receiving end of it."

The words tore into Vader like the barbs on the end of a Tusken Raider's gaffi stick. Not for the first time did he regret letting his jealous emotions get the better of him on Mustafar and to take them out on her. It was a foreign feeling, one he'd never truly identified until that moment. Staring at her in silence, he found himself unable to voice the feeling... and unwilling.

She continued, oblivious to the inner conflict she'd caused. "I don't know why I cared so much. I've seen and heard about plenty of the atrocities you've done. This was just one more to add to the list."

At a loss for words, he attempted to justify his actions with the mantra he'd convinced himself of long ago. "What I've done has been in the name of the Empire."

Padmé snorted. "Go ahead and keep on believing that. Who am I to stop you? One thing this whole situation with Asajj has done is remind me how much of a monster you've really become."

His fingers flexed on her hip, digging in and drawing her back around to lay on her back once more. His gaze caught and held hers as his face dipped downwards, his words husky. "You didn't think me like that yesterday night."

It was his arrogance that finally fueled her ability to move. Her hands came up, landing solidly against his chest and pushed. Disgusted with both of them, she knocked him away. "Don't you even talk to me about the other night," Rolling, she winced as the fabric connected with her face, finding her footing even as she fought the tilt of the room around her. "I told you that was a mistake and it'll never happen again."

"Won't it?"

If she'd been better equipped to handle hand to hand combat, she might have attempted to deck him again. Instead, her tone biting, she lashed back. "It won't. Not after you had to go and throw that in my face in front of Asajj! Did you enjoy humiliating me like that?"

Her focused returned in time to see Vader's nasty grin as he regained his feet on the other side of the bed and headed towards her. "The truth had to come out. Whether or not it humiliated you is your problem. You've been telling Asajj all this time that you hate me, that you want me dead. I wanted her to know that isn't true; that any suspicions she had about your feelings for me were right all along."

Ignoring the truth of the statement, Padmé backed away a step. "I admit I loved you once — more than anything. But I can never love you again. And knowing that you slept with her, over and over... and I can only imagine the ways you brutalized her after what I saw earlier —"

"She's a big girl," cutting her off, his tone was curt. "She can handle it. Years of training, even before I got a hold of her, and a rough life, made sure of that."

"And that's supposed to excuse all the things you've done to her!" Padmé gaped at him. "All that you've made her endure?"

Examining her like a specimen under a microscope, he crossed his arms over his chest. "Why do you care what's happened to Asajj? She *betrayed* you, remember?"

"She still doesn't deserve to be held up against a wall and choked!"

Vader and was cut off by the beeping of his comlink. Tearing it from his belt, he flicked it on with an irritated click. "This has best be important, General."

"I'm sorry to disturb you Lord Vader, but you're needed on the bridge."

"I'll be there shortly," without waiting for the General to respond, Vader slapped it back on his belt. Advancing on Padmé, he bent his head down close to hers. "Asajj is my apprentice. I treat her how I see fit. Sadly, you saw something today I didn't want you to, but it's none of your concern."

His steely gaze locked on hers for a moment before he turned on his heel and exited the bedroom. Caught flat footed, Padmé scrambled after him, exiting the bedroom as he was nearing the main door. Irate, she advanced on his back at a swift clip, almost catching up as he reached for the door controls. "It *is* my concern when I'm stuck in here with a monster!"

Vader whirled, surprising her, his outstretched hand curving unerringly about the back of her neck and drawing her into a hard, bruising kiss. The moment of stunned recognition was all it took for her to end up completely in his arms, his other arm wrapping about her waist as his fingers delved into the hair at the nape of her neck, angling her head for his kiss. Flush against him from shoulder to hip to knee, her feet on his toes, an explosion of emotion ripped through her with the intensity of his lips.

Torn between wanting to respond and knowing she shouldn't, between the need to give in and the knowledge that she couldn't, she remained stationary in those first few heartbeats. She'd only begun to kiss him back, helplessly unable to fight such a sudden onslaught, when he pulled away. His breath rasped across her cheek as he pressed his forehead against hers.

Looking at him, into the depth of his blue eyes, she watched them transition from the deeper blues of passion back to their normal crystalline quality. His expression shifted, unreadable to her muddled senses even as his words feathered her cheek.

“It’s none of your concern.”

She stumbled as he abruptly let her go, the release like being thrown into an ice cold shower — and with it came the clarity to understand his remark.

Except he was gone.

The door had already closed behind him, leaving her once again alone and infuriated in his quarters. None of her concern! “*That’s what you think!*” She shrieked at the door, feeling better for having done so, but worse for having given in to such a childish urge.

Another urge — to kick something — was suppressed as she spun on her heel, the pain in her face have reasserted itself with her outburst. Throbbing in tune with her heart beat, the bruise wouldn’t be ignored and Padmé headed for the ’fresher to check the damage.

What she saw in the looking glass wasn’t far from what she’d seen earlier that day. Her color was heightened, the bruise on the side of her face a red and purple, swollen mass that covered half of her face. A single red line where she’d struck the corner of the wall appeared to have creased her skin from temple to jaw line, but only the skin. Critically, Padmé assessed that the line would fade in time, as would the bruise.

It would simply blossom before that and she wasn’t looking forward to the black the purple would deepen into or the greens and yellows that would be certain to follow. Gingerly touching the bruise, she winced, remembering with crystal clarity the colors of Asajj’s bruises compared to her own. Dropping her hand, she wrapped her arms about her waist to quell the shudder that ripped through her frame. Asajj’s anger had been great — monumental even — and fueled only more-so by the fact she knew Padmé had shared Vader’s bed.

Regretting all the more the night they’d shared, she turned from her image, a sick feeling forcing her to sit or risk falling down. If Asajj’s anger was so great at such a minor provocation, damaging Padmé in a way that mirrored — in some ways — the abuse suffered at Vader’s hands, how much worse would it get? Would Asajj one day be driven to kill her?

Bile rose in the back of her throat as she considered her options. A friend who’d turned on her and a man who claimed to love her, but didn’t know her; a man who’d become a monster. Exiting the ’fresher without so much as a cool compress for the bruise, Padmé headed once again for the lounge and blindly settled into her space on the sofa.

Everything in her capture that had led up to this had been a mistake; no matter her weaknesses, nothing could happen between her and Vader again. Somehow she had to find a defense against him, one that couldn’t be overcome by her body’s memory of his touch.

Somehow.

The Toydarian situation was nowhere closer to a solution as Vader returned to his quarters late that evening. Dinner had been a rushed affair with the General while discussing tactical scenarios for the subjugation of Toydaria. Genocide was seriously being considered.

Leaving it behind him, he closed and locked the door to his quarters as he stepped inside, unable to see his wife immediately. He could sense her, somewhere nearby, her angry presence pulsing like a beacon. Striding towards the lounge where he suspected he'd find her, he took in the scene at a glance.

A partially filled plate of wilted vegetables with very little appearing to be missing from it, the rumpled sheets she'd claimed for her bedding and her form, rigid and taught, standing by the viewport. Stopping behind the sofa, he noted the line of her back, admiring her slim form from behind. "Padmé."

"Go away."

"You can ignore me all you like, but I'm not going anywhere." From the angle where he stood, he couldn't see the bruise on her face — and he wanted to. Concern for the damage Asajj had wrought was a major reason he'd returned from the bridge. "How are you feeling?"

"How am I ever feeling? *Go away.*"

Ignoring her demand, Vader stepped around the sofa, catching a glimpse of her mutinous expression from her profile before she turned to level an icy glare at him. Startled by the swelling on her visage, he momentarily stopped. "Padmé..." Three swift strides brought him to her side and she made to back away but Vader slid one hand around the back of her neck, his thumb cupping her jaw even as he crowded her against the viewport.

Padmé fought him, trying to duck away from his touch. "Get your hands—"

"*Be still.*"

His tone lashed at her, both hands now cupping her face and turning her bruise towards the light. An irritated flick of one wrist brought the lights on brighter and he frowned as her injury was revealed in all its distended glory. His hold made it impossible for her to resist, as he'd intended, and she trembled in his grasp, her eyes spitting fire as he took in the damage.

Padmé flinched as he feathered his thumb over the swollen flesh, one eye partially shut, the skin a mass of deep purple, nearly black bruises down the side of her face. His touch set off the same riot of flutters in her stomach as always and her vow, made just hours ago, to find a way to resist him suddenly seemed unattainable.

How was she supposed to fight him when a mere *brush* of his glove-encased hand made a mockery of her determination? Anger was her only refuge and defense against him, but how could she be angry when his touch conveyed such care?

"What are you—"

"Shh..."

His intense, concerned look silenced her the way his words couldn't, and she found herself floundering to remember that he was a monster she needed to resist.

"Does it hurt?"

"Only when I move."

A ghost of a smile flitted across his lips but was gone in the same heartbeat. “Or talk, or touch it, right?”

“Right.”

His thumb feathered over the curve of her bruised cheek again, his gaze meeting hers at last. “I hate to see you in pain and so marked, especially when I can do something to help.”

The offer was surprising and unexpected and his meaning lost on her for a moment. “Something you can... no,” she jerked in his hold, but he didn’t release her. “You’re *not* using the Dark Side on me just so *you* can feel better.”

“It’s not about me, it’s about you — and I couldn’t use the Dark Side to heal you even if I wanted to,” his other thumb brushed against her unblemished cheek this time, a faint smile crossing his lips. “Anger doesn’t lend itself well to the healing process.”

Wanting to believe him, for her face truly did hurt far more than she was willing to admit, Padmé searched his gaze for signs of deceit only to see genuine concern in the depth of his gaze. “Promise me you won’t touch the Dark Side for this.”

“I promise.”

Exhaling, Padmé tilted her chin up and braced herself, not completely sure what to expect. “Okay — go ahead.”

Using his teeth, Vader removed the glove on his real hand and tossed it aside. Ever so gently, he placed the finger tips against her skin, around the outside edges of the bruise and met her gaze. “This might feel a little strange.” His warning delivered, he closed his eyes.

A tingling sensation started in her temple, sweeping down through the swollen flesh of her face and ridding it of the throbbing pain that had been her constant companion since waking from the injury. The flesh around her eye receded, opening her vision wide once more, and she was aware as never before of his connection to the Force. Light or Dark, he manipulated it like one of his tools.

Long minutes passed as Vader remained where he was, his finger tips gently poised on her face, his eyes closed.

Finally, those ice-blue orbs opened once more, the warmth in their depth arrowing straight through her system like an electrical current. The bare skin of his finger tips slid across her cheek before he bent inwards, brushing his lips in a soft caress across her previously bruised temple, before releasing her.

Confused, and angry because of it, Padmé’s wariness inundated Vader and made him painfully aware that tonight was *not* a night to broach any subject of importance with his wife. Despite the fact he’d reduced the impact of her injury, at significant cost to himself — it was almost physically painful to have such pure and untainted contact to the Force — he knew she’d never understand. Not his motivations nor his reason for being willing to endure for her sake; if she knew.

And she never would.

Drained, and unwilling to press any kind of point that would be met with resistance, he met her gaze. “Good night.” Stepping away, he released her with one last caress, his finger

dragging over her jaw line, before turning, scooping his glove from where it had fallen, and striding towards his bedchamber.

Behind him, Padmé stared at him confused, at a loss for words for how to explain or justify his behaviour to herself. She'd expected some demand for recompense, some insistence that she share his bed now that he believed her in his debt. Watching him cross the room without a backward glance, the bedchamber door closing behind him, put her in a tail spin of unexpected force.

Shaking her head to rid herself of the dangerous thoughts, Padmé turned her back on the door and stared back out the viewport and deliberately reminded herself that Vader never did anything for nothing. Asajj was proof positive of that and look where it had landed the Force adept. Sooner or later he'd demand repayment for healing her and she was afraid she knew in exactly what way that demand would come.

Month Twenty Four, Day 16 PEF, morning

And a little change of pace — the tedium of Padmé’s capture is about to shift gears *grin*

Once again, all errors are mine; Daenarra has been incommunicado for some time as not beta read these... I take full responsibility.

Enjoy!

Thanks for reading :)

Chapter 50

Vader’s Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Sixteen PEF

Morning ended the tentative truce from the previous night, with Vader’s arrogance reasserting itself full force. Well rested, the demand she’d expected, and been prepared to rebuff, the previous night surfaced. He drew Padmé’s anger out in such a way that their argument before breakfast had Vader leaving for the bridge immediately after spitefully accusing her of being ungrateful.

“Ungrateful?”

Padmé cursed at the closed door, a part of her acknowledging that he was right — she was being ungrateful — but she had no intention of showing her gratitude in the fashion he most wanted. “I’m not ungrateful, you... you nerf herding wretch!”

Cursing Vader for his arrogance and high-handedness, Padmé prowled through their quarters without really seeing any of her surroundings. A hot shower did nothing to ease the tension in her frame and the image of the fading bruise on her face only served to fuel the anger burning in her gut rather than ease it.

Better that he had left her face so marked, a reminder of Asajj’s fury and the cost of her own personal weaknesses. Better that he’d never touched her, never healed her so she was not in his debt.

Arrogant, insufferable man!

Unable to contain her frustrations, Padmé headed for the door to their quarters and slapped the controls with more force than necessary. The guards stood at attention, as they always did, whenever she appeared. “My Lady.”

“I’m going walking, Commander,” her tone was curt, as she stepped into the hallway, “and I am going now. If you need the rest of the detail, have them join us later.”

“Lady Vader, I—”

The *look* she sent him immediately drew his obedience and his silence. He inclined his head, no doubt signaling to the rest of her guards as he did so, in some inaudible fashion. Without waiting for any kind of signal from the Commander, Padmé struck out. Walking quickly, she headed in the opposite direction from the training salle and the “special quarters” where she knew now that Asajj roomed.

Her speed today was driven by her need to escape, her need for some kind of physical release, and — to her surprise — she caught her guard flat footed when she suddenly broke into a sprint around a series of corners.

“Lady Vader!”

“After her!”

The call sounded behind her, but Padmé paid it no heed as she ran through the hallways.

Blindly turning corners, she outdistanced them in seconds, ducking into a dark side corridor as they went running past. Turning back on herself, she blindly drove down the opposite hallway. Unexpectedly alone, Padmé found herself at the turbo lift and slapped the activation panel, her adrenaline pumping. Luck was with her as the doors slid open silently, the magnitude of her situation almost unreal.

Alone.

Escape was possible if she played her cards right.

Driven by that thought, she stepped into the lift and hit the control panel, directing it anywhere but the floor she was currently on. The doors closed and it whisked her away, an alarm sounding through the ship as it passed the next two levels, whisking her away from the deck where she’d been held captive the last two weeks. Alarmed her escape had been noticed, Padmé ducked her face away from the surveillance cam and exited at a quick clip as the doors slid open on another level.

Soldiers and their commanding officers marched, ensigns darting between them as they headed through the corridors of the ship. Padmé, wary of being spotted, turned the first corner she came two and opened a thin door just around it. A supply closet. Unfortunately, it yielded nothing of much of use beyond a quick hiding place.

The sound of blaster fire could be heard down one corridor, and an audible signal she recognized from the old Republic’s battle cruisers as the ‘we’ve been boarded’ signal suddenly flared into life. Her shoulders relaxed as she realized that her escape hadn’t yet been reported — or rather, was the lesser of two emergencies. In the chaos, it was possible she’d be able to hijack a ship and get out of there.

Hope swelled in her breast and she took a deep breath to calm herself. Glancing as best she could down the hallway, Padmé slipped from the closet into a mercifully quiet corridor. Marching and running footsteps spurred her into action, darting silently between corridors as she moved in the direction of the blaster fire.

Boarded.

If they’d been boarded, she was willing to bet it had been through the hanger bay — which presented itself as a prime opportunity for her to slip away without being noticed. If she could

escape, the time would be now. Her mind was moving a mile a minute, formulating a plan that was as daring as it was suicidal. But if it succeeded... freedom! That alone made it worth the risk.

Crouching low at the next intersection, the sound of a footstep behind her had her spinning on the ball of one foot and reaching for the blaster that wasn't there. Familiar boots began to round a corner behind her and Padmé acted before she thought better of it, darting forward and around the corner.

Asajj — great, just great.

If the Force adept caught her, she'd be turned over to Vader in a heartbeat. A nearby stack of shipping goods had been abandoned on a service lift just off from the main hallway and Padmé took the opportunity to dive behind them as Asajj rounded the corner. She crouched low behind the containers, peaking between the gaps to gauge Asajj's progress.

The Force adept's pace slowed, her gaze on Padmé's hiding place, her expression tightening in obvious displeasure.

A chill slid down Padmé's spine as she took in Asajj's expression and *knew* she'd been made; her hiding place no longer the sanctuary it had seemed, and probably hadn't been since Asajj had left her quarters. That was the problem with Force users; it was so damned hard to hide from them. Bracing herself for a fight, Padmé tensed her muscles, knowing she'd only get one chance to strike if at all.

In the split second it took for Padmé to prepare, the imperious tones of her captor sliced through the din of blaster fire.

"*Asajj!*" The adept's face blanked as she partially turned towards the sound, Vader striding into view. "Have you found her yet?"

Her escape had been noted. Padmé unconsciously held her breath, feeling her heart sink into her heels as she waited for Asajj to turn her in; as she waited to be returned to her gilded cage.

Except, it didn't happen.

"I've already told you I won't help you search for her." There was no mistaking the underlying anger in her tone — or the way Asajj rolled one shoulder as if to loosen up an abused muscle. "But if you must know, I've not seen her."

Padmé clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the startled exclamation that escaped, strangling the sound before it got far. Fortunately, the sounds of combat — running feet, barked commands and blaster fire — prevented it from being overheard.

Asajj hadn't sold her out to Vader; why?

Vader's back was to Padmé but she still missed the way his shoulders tensed under his cloak as she kept her gaze on Asajj, trying to determine what game the Force adept was playing. It was in her best interest to turn Padmé back over to Vader's care. Why not reveal her location and allow Vader to continue his subjugation of her? For that matter, why couldn't Vader find her hiding spot?

"Do you wish to keep your—"

“You’ve time to threaten me later, *Master*.” Asajj daringly cut off his angry threat. “And while you waste your time with me, she’s probably sending a distress signal to Max by now.”

Vader’s hand shot out and Asajj was slammed backwards to crash hard into the nearby wall. “Never mention *that name* in my presence! You’re useless Asajj.”

“Only in this circumstance, *Master*.” Somehow, she managed a dark smile as she pushed herself away from the wall and looked deliberately towards the sound of nearby combat. “I thought to make myself useful in other ways.”

“Go,” his tone was disgusted. “Take no prisoners. I’ll find her myself!”

Vader stormed away, heading in the opposite direction of Padmé’s hiding spot and she exhaled the breath she’d been fighting to keep. Asajj hadn’t turned her over to Vader — would wonders never cease? Sitting back, she placed her back to the crate and listened to Vader’s retreat; the sound of his footfalls were quickly lost in the din of battle.

Tilting her head back, she closed her eyes and focused on her breathing, inhaling and exhaling to clear the surge of adrenaline that had flooded her system the moment Asajj had appeared. It diminished slowly, far too slowly to her liking. She needed to think clearly, to formulate a plan, and couldn’t while the conversation replayed in her mind and the questions continued to circle around in her mind.

Why?

Why hadn’t Asajj turned her over to Vader; why wasn’t she even now being carted back to his quarters? What had possessed the Force adept to risk herself in such a fashion for a woman she proclaimed to hate and what did Asajj stand to gain from this gamble?

For a gamble it was; if Vader ever learned Asajj had lied to him, she faced severe punishment, even death.

How?

How had Vader missed her signature? Padmé wasn’t Force capable; she wasn’t even aware of how to mask her life signs if she had been. Vader should have found her without much more effort than it took him to breathe. Should have—

Near skeletal fingers closed about her wrist, and her eyes shot open as she was physically dragged to her feet. Without thinking, Padmé struggled, her mind already having jumped to the conclusion in that split second that Asajj hadn’t turned her over to Vader because she wanted to kill her herself.

“Stop struggling,” Asajj hissed, squeezing tight enough to make Padmé flinch.

The feeling started to leave Padmé’s hand and she was forced to still — and in that moment Asajj slapped something small into Padmé’s trembling fingers. None too gently, Asajj folded Padmé’s fingers around the object — the same size and shape of a data disc — and squeezed her hand hard.

Padmé winced, looking down to the item to find she’s been half-right; it was a *holo* disc. Confused, she looked back to Asajj.

“Now we’re even.”

“What?”

“A mutual betrayal followed by your intervention had placed me in your debt; no longer.” Pushing a button on the disc, she shifted her hand as a schematic of the ship popped up. Lifting her gaze back to Padmé’s incredulous one, Asajj met it head on, seeing the reality of the situation slowly seeping into Padmé’s usually quick mind. “We’re even.”

“Much as I want to, I can’t use these; Vader will sense—”

“No; he won’t.” Asajj’s eyes flashed as she leaned in close, her tone turning menacing: “If you get off this ship and I ever see you again, I promise I *will* kill you.”

One last look of complete understanding passed between them as Asajj abruptly dropped Padmé’s hand and turned on her heel, heading for the flight deck.

There was no doubting the sincerity of Asajj’s threat as Padmé watched the Force adept walk away. Asajj had only helped her to repay the debt she so obviously felt she owed; whatever that was exactly, Padmé could only guess. Since their paths had only crossed since arriving on the *Exactor*, it had to have been something to do with their confrontation outside her quarters and her actions towards Vader.

Whatever the reason, it was clear Asajj felt this cleared that debt; offering her a chance to escape and the means to do so. It was a chance, Padmé knew, that wasn’t likely to come around again. And, should — *when* she succeeded in escaping, Padmé would be very careful to be in a part of the galaxy that was as distant as humanly possible from Asajj.

Despite her curiosity for wanting to know why Asajj felt thus obligated, especially everything that had happened — not only between the two of them, but between Asajj and Vader — Padmé thrust the thoughts away and focused on the image before her. Crouching back into her hiding spot, and knowing she was safe for the moment, she manipulated the image in her hand. Zeroing in, she found a rough approximation of her location.

It wasn’t tapped into a real time feed, so she had no way of knowing just how far the incursion forces attempting to board the ship had gone, or where the personnel were, but it would be a major assistance in planning her route. She took a few precious minutes as the blaster shots continued in the distance, getting fainter, and then louder, the echo of commanders calling for reinforcements reaching her ears.

Padmé blocked it all out and instead committed as much of the ship as she intended to use to memory. A few decks, but the real trick would be getting into the bay itself with this boarding action ongoing. If she tried to make a break for it, whomever was boarding the ship would likely cut her down if they saw her; if the Imperials saw her, they’d turn her over to Vader.

No, there had to be an alternate way to gain access to the bay...

Pulling back to examine the schematics further, she zeroed in on the fighter storage bay near the belly of the ship — and a small smile began to cross her lips, an almost unholy glee filling her eyes. A plan had started to take definitive shape... and Vader would never see it coming.

Month Twenty Four, Day 16 PEF, noon

Sorry for the short and late update; I've been on holidays... much, *much* longer update to come next time... I promise!

Chapter 51

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Sixteen PEF

"My apologies, Lord Vader, we've searched every room on the level with no sign of Lady Vader."

"If she's no longer on this level, than she must be elsewhere," Vader snapped the answer across the comlink channel, wishing at that moment he could strangle the proving-to-be-inept Commander across the line. "I don't want your excuses Commander, find her!"

"Yes, my Lord. We've started with the turbo lift logs from the time of her disappearance, but pin pointing which lift she used and what floor she exited on will take time."

Time his errant wife was using to make a fool of him. Vader's tread seemed to get heavier as his anger increased, frustration fuelling the act. He should have been able to sense her, to bring this to an immediate stop, instead his ship was being boarded, his wife had all but disappeared and the detail assigned to Padmé was proving to be more inept than that idiot Gungan Jar Jar had ever been!

"I want her found, Commander; *now!*"

"Yes sir, we'll—"

The transmission was broken as Vader crushed the comlink in his grip and flung it away in disgust. He'd done as Asajj had so delightfully suggested, almost overcome by a jealous rage to think that his Padmé would even have a passing thought about the other man now that she'd resumed her role in his bed. However tumultuous her feelings regarding the issue, she was his and he intended to keep her that way.

"Lord Vader."

"Not now, General."

"But the boarders, my Lord—"

"I *said*," whirling, Vader extended his hand and abruptly cut off the General's wind pipe to prevent further reports. "*Not now.*"

The General nodded, grasping at his throat as he struggled to break the invisible hold and draw air. Vader tossed him aside with a wave of his hand, only vaguely conscious that he had

no other Generals on board ship and, frankly, he hadn't the patience to break one in. The General hit the deck with a dull thud, skidding across the hull plates before striking the wall.

Several of the deck officers jumped to assist the General as Vader swept off the bridge silently cursing the ineptitude of his troops. His ship had been boarded by those infuriating pests and not immediately repelled; the sensor operator had been replaced — which had been his purpose for this trip to the bridge — for failing to detect their approach in the first place and now Padmé was missing. Not only had she jumped the guard assigned to her, but she'd done it so skillfully, he realized he hadn't prepared them for her ingenuity.

This escape attempt of Padmé's was his own fault — the fact she was even still *thinking* about escape after the other night was confounding. He'd thought they were making progress; that they were moving forward and beyond this. Apparently he'd been wrong. Trust Padmé to capitalize on an opportunity when it was presented. If he knew anything about her, it was that she was masterful at improvisation and thinking on her feet. To make matters worse, he couldn't sense her, for some unknown reason, to even get a *general* direction of her whereabouts.

It left him on edge, frustrated and fuming with the knowledge of a thousand battles slapping him with the brutal honesty of facts. Padmé's re-capture was not going to be easy.

Stepping into a lift outside the bridge, Vader struggled to think clearly. The docking bay was the most logical point of exit for Padmé; if she could steal one of the fighters currently on deck, she'd be able to escape. Of course, they weren't hyperdrive capable, so he dismissed the notion immediately. The landing craft used by the boarders might be; if she was able to sneak aboard and steal the ship or stowaway, the miserable Toydarians would probably help her just to spite him.

Slapping the wall console, he called up the hanger bay.

A trooper appeared instead of the deck commander, saluting and then ducking. "Lord Vader!"

"Destroy the landing craft."

"Yes sir!"

The transmission cut off as the turbolift stopped on the designated floor. The sound of blaster fire was immediate, but Vader ignored it; his troops could deal with the incursion — he had more important matters to attend to.

The head of Padmé's guard detail was waiting for him, a new comlink in hand, and started without preamble. "We've confirmed she exited on this deck, my Lord; one of the technicians was able to find footage of her exiting the turbolift, and they traced her down those corridors," he motioned to the left. "Unfortunately, the disturbance in the hangar bay has knocked out the connections on this level and we've been unable to re-establish the security feed."

"In other words, we're being forced to search room by room," Vader bit off the words with frustration. "I don't care how it's done Commander; rouse your relief shifts and take every available trooper to search. I want her found — *now!*"

Padmé listened to Vader order his troops about from an air vent in the wall almost right next to the commander of her guard. Her lips twisted and she was shaking as she realized she was waiting for him to turn towards the wall, to lift his hand as he sometimes did in her nightmares, and reach for her beyond the durasteel.

It wasn't to be.

Watching, she marveled at how... disorganized the troopers appeared as they began tearing the deck apart, plate by plate, door by door. At this rate, it would take them hours to find her in her current hiding spot.

For whatever reason, Vader couldn't sense her and she intended to use it to the best of her advantage. First, she made sure she couldn't and wouldn't be followed. Asajj's word proved to be as good as it had once been, with Vader moving away without so much as glancing at her hiding place. Exhaling softly, she turned to go as a shock wave echoed through the ship, the explosion rocking the hangar bay

Vader paused, a grim smile crossing his lips, and Padmé realized he'd been expecting her to attempt to steal the landing craft. His opinion, it would seem, had increased significantly with regards to her skills. Not even she could have gotten onto the craft if she'd had Asajj and Max beside her; she knew because she'd looked.

The hangar bay was a mess, the troops and invaders causing a kind of diversion she'd never hoped to obtain. And Vader's troops weren't acquitting themselves very admirably.

Asajj would change that, however, and she needed to move quickly. Checking one last time to ensure Vader was moving away and the troopers were checking room by room, backtracking and double checking to ensure she wasn't where they'd already searched, a tight smile crossed her lips. Moving away, she crept quickly down the vent shaft, checking the schematic as a guide and leaving the sound of the battle and Vader's search behind her.

Codes she would need were inserted in the appropriate place, along with the small window for which they'd be active before being changed. Seeing there was no time to waste, Padmé broke into a swift walk as she passed from vent shaft to vent shaft, sliding down rails of ladders and slipping into access ducts normally only used by droids. Finally, she arrived at her destination and keyed in the second to last of the remaining command codes on the disc.

The fighter storage bay doors opened silently, the ring lights already activated, giving her a clear view of the cavernous area. In the corner, beside the lift that would take the ships to another of the hangar bays, was her target; Vader's *personal* fighter.

Walking towards it, Padmé kept her eyes scanning the area for any sign that she'd been tracked or located. She found none as she stepped next to the dormant fighter. Gently, she placed her hand on the canopy, finding the exterior controls that would open it, and popped the hatch. Disarming Vader's security protocols to start the ship, however, weren't in the database.

Muttering a soft curse, Padmé looked about for an alternative mode of transportation just as the lights in the droid bay came on. Ducking down inside the cockpit, Padmé kept one eye on the door — and exhaled with relief as Artoo trundled out, a part in his grasper, wires trailing behind it.

“Artoo!”

The droid squawked, dropping what looked to be some kind of fuel converter, before letting out a surprised and excited series of noise as Padmé vaulted from the cockpit to land beside him.

Padmé hushed him immediately. “Quiet Artoo!”

He tootled a question she had no problem understanding without the translation pad. “I have to get out of here Artoo, the ship’s been compromised, I’m all alone and I can’t use Vader’s fighter on my own. Can you help me?”

Artoo let out an indecisive moan, his round dome rotating back and forth from the ship to Padmé and back. He made a half-hard sounds and this time Padmé knelt to read his comment. *He won’t like it.*

“He won’t like it when I end up dead because of this either. If you’re not going to help me, I’ll just have to find another way to get off this Force forsaken ship!”

Pushing to her feet, hurt and sore the droid would choose *Vader* over her, Padmé turned to leave when Artoo let out a series of whistles she knew to be cautionary. “I don’t care, Artoo; I can’t stay here any longer.”

The sound of engines firing up behind her had her head turning. Artoo had vaulted himself into the astromech slot, the pre-flight already in motion. He warbled at her, the cockpit — which had closed upon her exit — opening invitingly. Scrambling into the fighter, Padmé buckled herself in.

“Okay Artoo, set these coordinates into the nav computer. As soon as we’re clear of the gravity well, we’ll need to jump away, got it?”

His affirmative confirmation was accompanied with a system status of green. Whatever upgrade Artoo had been intending to do, it wouldn’t affect her plans. The pre-flight was done in record time, Artoo booting past the usual stops with such efficiency, Padmé got the feeling he was the only droid to ever work with this fighter. Which, she supposed, made sense.

Vader would never have tolerated sub-standard performance from any of his equipment.

The lift began moving unexpectedly as Artoo gained control, filtering reports from the level above down into the screen. Padmé pulled on Vader’s helmet and jacked into the comm. line. “-not here sir; she could be anywhere.”

“She’s here somewhere, Commander; I want this ship torn apart until she’s back at my side where she belongs!”

Artoo whistled indecisively again, seeming to question helping her now that Vader’s concern had been voiced over the coded channel. “Keep going Artoo; we’ll be safer once we’re in space.”

His protest scrolled across the screen. *If you’re in danger, the best place for you to be is beside him; he protected you once — he always will.*

Padmé hardened her heart against the droid’s logic. *Anakin* had protected her; *Vader* had tried to kill her. Keying in the manual override, Padmé fed the fail series of codes into the

computer; codes for opening the hangar bay. Above her, the lift doors opened into a smoky, foggy chaos she was sure smelt of burnt ozone and death. Ignoring it, she used the override code to open the outer doors as Artoo let out a shrill whistle.

Padmé barely glanced to the side as the ship shot off the platform and through the deflector field — but it was enough to glimpse the thunderous rage on Vader's face as he watched her steal his prized fighter.

Month Twenty Four, Day 16 PEF, evening

Chapter 52

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Sixteen PEF

Vader stared into the vacuum as his fighter shot away from the ship and flipped his comm. link frequency over to the private link that tied him to Artoo.

"Artoo!"

His barked irritation was met with an immediate explanation and a scold; Padmé had asked for Artoo's help to get away from Vader — and Artoo had assisted because she'd made it seem so reasonable and he'd seen how badly Vader was treating Padmé.

"Don't take sides, Artoo," Vader snapped, irritated the droid felt he had to. "Padmé's overwrought; she's not thinking clearly and I can't protect her outside of this ship. The battle out there aside, have you any idea what the Emperor will do to her if he catches her? I can't protect her if that happens and I *won't* let that happen! Put her on this frequency."

Artoo was silent for a long moment and Vader waited for Artoo's affirmative twaddle. Modulating his tone, Vader spoke to his runaway wife. "Padmé."

"What do you want?"

"You need to come back; you're not safe out there."

"If that was your version of safe, I was safer in a coma, you... you Kowakian Monkey-Lizard!"

Despite his irritation, Vader chuckled. "Inventive as always. Artoo — bring her home."

"No, Artoo, don't... he can't protect me like he says!"

Artoo made a confused sound, as if torn, before Vader got on the comm. again. "Now, Artoo. The longer she's out there, the better the chances that someone picks up on this transmission — and her location. Do you want her to be a target?"

"Wait... stop, Artoo! Don't do this — you don't know what he'll do to me!"

Vader knew what he'd like to do with her — take her straight back to bed and exhaust her until she couldn't move a muscle — but he doubted she'd appreciate the sentiment in her frame of mind. A pity; based on her inventive insults to Artoo, her threats and finally pleas, Vader wondered if the next time they were together would be as explosive as the last.

Probably.

He flicked off the comlink.

Striding onto the still smoking deck, Vader waited with his arms crossed, now able to sense Padmé's frustration as the ship crossed back through the deflector shield. Why he hadn't before remained a mystery he hadn't the patience to explore at the moment. The deck

war had been subdued about the same time Padmé had flown his fighter out of the hangar and the troopers were removing the smoking corpses. Droids were already at work to remove the wreckage of the boarding craft and repairing the damage to the deck. Asajj was collecting her trophies or some such thing, kneeling beside the Toydarian dead and meticulously going through their effects.

Ignoring it all, Vader kept his gaze on his fighter, his temper simmering from the all explosive rage at finding her gone, to something closer to irritation. She'd dared to defy him in a public manner and attempted to steal *his* modified fighter — along with Artoo — while making a fool of him and his men. Grudging admiration for her tactics lay underneath the irritation, but he wasn't about to let her see it.

As the fighter curved gracefully back around, heading directly for him, Vader could see the figure of his determined wife, hauling back on the stick, her thunderous expression murderous as it fixed on him, her lips moving rapidly as she — no doubt — continued to scold Artoo. The little droid landed the craft next to Vader with pin-point precision, ejecting from his socket with a displeased squeal followed by an intricate series of beeps and whistles as he landed next to Vader. The hatch popped moments later, and Padmé's furious tirade spilling over the flight deck.

“—good, low-life, under-handed, backstabbing, squib faced liar!”

Amused more than insulted, Vader took the two steps required to get him to the wing, leaning forward as he placed both hands on the fuselage. Watching her flipping the switches uselessly — and deliberately ignoring him — he let her figure out what was happening before putting it to voice.

“Artoo's overridden the controls, Padmé; you're not going anywhere.”

Glaring at him, Padmé slammed her hands into the control console before getting very deliberately to her feet. “Anywhere is better than here.”

“Now isn't the time for this,” Vader returned sternly, not needing to look around the deck to see that — while work continued — their drama was on display for everyone to see. “We'll discuss this when we get back to our quarters.”

“We'll discuss this now,” Padmé shot back angrily, refusing to take that first step out of the fighter; being in the cockpit gave her the uncertain advantage of looking down on Vader — something she was surprised to find she liked. A lot. “I'm not going back to that gilded prison!”

“You'll go back there if I have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you.”

“You wouldn't dare!”

Ice blue eyes glittered dangerously. “You know better. Stop this nonsense, Padmé and surrender with dignity.”

“Or what? You'll make an example of me? Touch me again and I'll... I'll permanently maim you!”

His patience exhausted, Vader straightened and extended his hand, palm upwards, fingers out, towards Padmé. That she flinched only made him angry as he lifted his fingers, grasping

her in the grip of the Force. It was a tight grasp, tighter than it otherwise might have been if she hadn't flinched.

"Don't you da— urk! You bastard son of a Hutt — let me *go*!"

Padmé twisted in the air as Vader lifted her free of the cockpit, kicking and fighting the force of his mental hold as she spat promises of brutal punishments — he hadn't known she was that inventive. Dropping her none too gently to the deck beside him. She lashed out, trying to strike him, but Vader'd had enough.

Catching her arm, he used her momentum against her and swept her upwards as she cried out in frustration and dismay. The sound of the air escaping her lungs — and rendering her momentarily speechless — was like music to his ears as he dropped her over his shoulder. Turning, he dismissed the guards that were supposed to have accompanied her back to his quarters, and undertook the task himself.

Recovered after a few moments of his rolling stride, Padmé swung her knees and was rewarded with having them clamped together and outwards, avoiding a kick to his face. Swearing, she reached for the lightsaber on his belt, and Vader tilted her just enough she couldn't reach it.

"Let. Me. Go!"

Vader's free hand landed square on her backside. Saying nothing, he made for the lift, Padmé pounding his back and clawing at the walls in an attempt to break his hold. Holding on with grim determination, Vader stepped into the turbo lift that would take them back to the floor where his personal apartments were.

Padmé continued to thrash twisting against his ironclad hold, until his fingers dug into her posterior with enough force to pierce her anger clouded mind. Frustration ran rampant through her veins; she'd been so close to freedom she'd been able to taste it, to remember what it was like — and then been brutally betrayed and returned to imprisonment. It was more than she could bear with the feel of his hands once again on her body; she *needed* to escape, to distance herself — to forget what she'd once felt for the man he'd been.

And fate seemed inclined to thwart her ever step.

Surprise made her stiffen as Vader turned off the path to his quarters, but pride wouldn't let her ask where they were going as she twisted to try and see. A door opened, Vader stepping through with two firm strides — and then he unceremoniously dropped her.

Letting out a yelp of surprise more than hurt as she hit a padded mat floor, Padmé took in her surroundings with barely a glance and instead kept her focus on the man who'd dared manhandle her. Why he'd brought her to the training salle, she couldn't even begin to fathom. Vader gestured impatiently to the door, the panel sliding shut before the click of the lock sliding into place echoed like a blaster shot in the room. The doors had barely closed before Vader took several long strides to the other side of the room.

"Just who do you—"

Vader ignored her and instead pressed on a pressure plate on the wall, a cleverly designed door sliding back to reveal a room Padmé couldn't see from her angle on the mats. Irritated and angry, it didn't quell the surge of curiosity his actions provoked. Pushing to her feet, she

didn't dare take a step in the direction of the door, but she watched it cautiously, not exactly certain what he was doing.

Vader returned a moment later, two rods in hand, and threw one her way, "Here," he closed the door, not waiting to see if she'd catch it. "Take this."

Reflex had her hand shooting out to catch the weapon, and it took a moment of examining it to realize she held a training saber. What Vader was doing with them she didn't know, but they were basically exotic stun batons — higher charged, true, but why give her one? She lifted her gaze from the baton.

"Why?"

"You're angry with me; you need to let it out."

"Angry?" Derision entered her tone. 'You're damned right I'm angry with you! I have been for a long time.' She threw the training saber to the floor. "*This* isn't going to help me with that in any way."

"Still," twirling the training saber he still held idly in his hand, Vader started towards her, 'all this anger isn't good for you.' There was something in his gaze that pinned her, held her in place, and she narrowed her eyes at him, refusing to let the discomfort that look brought show. "And you've been fighting with me ever since you got here. Why not just let it all out. I'll even refrain from using the Force."

Glaring at him, Padmé considered the offer. It was surprisingly tempting; they'd spared hand to hand without the Force before his fall and, while Anakin had always had an edge in strength, she was quicker. With the anger simmering within her, there was little doubt in her mind that she'd give him a well deserved beating — but that wouldn't make her any better than he was. Still... the idea of a little payback was dangerously alluring.

Vader stopped at sparring range, despite her saber being on the ground, his tone holding a hint of mockery. "Come now, Padmé. I'm sure you would love nothing more than to beat me to a pulp. All those slaps and hits can't be enough for you."

For a moment she *almost* did as he expected her to; *almost* scooped the saber from the floor to send *him* to the mat — but managed to restrain the impulse; barely. Shaking, her hands clenched at her sides, she gritted her teeth.

"Don't tempt me."

"This isn't tempting you, Padmé." Cocky, he smiled before his tone turned caressing. "I *know* how to do that."

"Forget it." Her glare turned into something glacial as Padmé deliberately kicked the saber his way, crossing her arms over her chest to quell the urge to strike him as much as her shaking — but there was no way to keep her agitation from her voice. "I don't know how to use it."

"You disappoint me, Padmé." he scooped the training saber from the floor with a chuckle, shaking his head as he moved towards her once more. "Where's the woman who had no problem defending herself or stepping into battle, like you did on Geonosis or any time at all during the Clone Wars."

“Don’t you talk to me about Geonosis or the Clone Wars. If I had known what that was leading into I would have done more to try and prevent it. I would have done whatever I could to keep—” cutting herself off, Padmé looked away, unable to meet his gaze lest he see the truth behind the unspoken sentiment. Lest he *see* that she’d been about to say she would have done whatever she could to keep him from turning to the Dark Side.

“Keep what, Padmé?”

Mentally, she berated herself for almost letting it slip. “Nothing.”

Vader took another step her way. “You’re lying to me.”

“So what if I am?” She practically bit off the words. “It won’t matter anyways. It’s too late.”

Too late for what?

Considering her, Vader found he was curious as to what she’d been about to say — but curiosity was easily suppressed. Later, after she’d worked out her frustrations, he would indulge and coerce her into revealing what she’d been about to say, but for now, she needed an outlet; needed *this*... and he knew just what buttons to push. “It’s never too late. There’s always hope for whatever it is you wanted to keep. If it’s precious enough to you.”

She reacted as if programmed, the words spilling from her lips spitefully. “Like you keeping me here against my will, like I’m some kind of damned trophy!” Taking two uncoordinated steps, she stopped in front of him and met his gaze head on, her own shooting fire. ‘Why don’t you just put me on display for everyone on this damned ship to see? *‘Oh, look, it’s Darth Vader’s wife.’* I’m sure everyone would love that!’ Spinning on her heel, she stalked away a few steps before turning back to look at him. The futility of her escape attempt came crashing home and Vader could see the way she seethed, angry at him, angry at herself, and the words quickly followed. “I was so close, so *close* to getting away from you. I could *taste* it, *feel* it, but you just wouldn’t let me go.”

“I told you,” Vader closed the distance in an easy stride and a half, his tone mild and even, his gaze eerily calm. “Now that you’re at my side you’re never leaving it.”

“The hell I’m not!” Reason fled and whatever thin thread of sanity Padmé had been holding onto snapped. Her voice rose, filling the room as she yelled at him for all she was worth. “I’m not staying here any longer than I have to and letting you take away the one last thing I own. Everything I had is gone because of you: my children, my family, the Republic, *you*. I’m not letting you take away my freedom too; no matter how hard you try! I almost had it again. It was almost there in my hands, and I *will* get it back!”

The image of who she’d been superimposed itself over the disheveled woman in the training salle, and Vader saw her as she’d been. Proud; noble; beautiful. It was a hint of the woman she’d been, her speech — despite being screamed at him — was one she could have made in the senate. Regardless of the circumstances, it was a hint he enjoyed seeing, a justification for all the chaos he’d dealt with over the last weeks and a reminder of just how passionate the woman he’d married could be.

Without thinking of the consequences, Vader closed the distance between them completely and pulled her into his arms, his lips descending on hers as her body instinctively aligned with

his.

Caught off guard, Padmé's reaction was almost instant — and her temper flared even as she felt the way her body wished to yield. Tearing her lips from his, she shoved him for all she was worth. The unexpected attack had the result she hoped for, and Vader was pushed back a couple of steps. Furious, she tossed her head.

"Do you think this is some kind of joke? Some kind of *game*? Men — you all think that sex will fix everything; haven't you heard a word I've said? Doesn't the fact I want off this ship and away from you tell you anything?"

"Say whatever you want, Padmé," Vader closed the distance between them again, bending his head so that their eyes were level. "Lie to my face if you have to, but don't lie to yourself — and *don't* think for one second I don't understand what this is about."

"Get away from—"

"Reclamation," he cut her off, his ungloved fingers whispering the barest of discernible caresses down one cheek. Padmé slapped his hand away. "No matter how hard you try to deny it, you can't escape the fact that you were reclaiming me as much as I was you — and it kills you."

A shriek tore from Padmé's throat as she lunged at him, the inarticulate cry of rage pressing him backwards as much as the double open-palms to his chest. Her next strike forced him back another step, and then another, her knees and feet joining her hands as she struck him from every which angle.

"Liar!" The vehement denial slipped from her lips, the first coherent denial as her foot connected with his side, staggering him with the blow. "You can't know-!"

Broken statements followed his progress as Vader didn't lift a hand to stop her. Blow after blow landed on his body as he was gradually forced backwards and to the side until his back came up against the wall. He lifted no hand in his defense, made no move to ward off any of her attacks — she needed this. Needed this outlet; this satisfaction. Despite the beating, it was the verbal component that accompanied each blow that held his attention.

"I was almost free; I would never-!"

A knee struck him in the thigh.

"I'm not like you and Asajj, I don't-!"

A toe found his ankle.

"I just want to get out of here, to find-!"

Her fist impacted in the center of his stomach.

"I don't want this; I don't want-!"

An open hand found the side of his face with a stinging *slap*— and Vader decided enough was enough. The anger and pain of the last few weeks, coupled with the resulting confusion, had spilled over into this outburst, but the fuel was fading and her license for assault was at an end.

As her hand retracted, he moved, stepping into her space and pulling her into his arms. “Shh, easy Padmé.”

Padmé struggled against his hold, her hands pushing against his chest. “Let me go — *let go!*”

“Calm down; it’s okay.”

“It’s not okay!” Twisting in his grasp, she attempted to knee him and was thwarted. “It will never be okay!”

“It’s alright, my love,” he cajoled, holding her tight enough she couldn’t injure him, but not tight enough to cause her harm. He took a step backwards, leaning against the wall to brace himself so he could concentrate on holding her, calming her. “Now calm yourself.”

“I will not!” her hands trapped against his chest, Padmé pushed against the immovable wall, his arms bands of durasteel across her back. “Don’t touch me!”

“It’s okay, Padmé.”

“No it’s not... it’s *not!*”

Her broken insistence was the end of his tolerance. Irritation and anger began to filter into the edges of his patience even as a flash of holding her — skin to skin — blindsided him. The recent memory from the other evening caused his hold to tighten fractionally. Padmé stopped squirming for a moment, sucking in a sharp breath and Vader pounced, his lips covering hers.

Frustration and surprise held Padmé as immobile as his hold for a long second as his lips moved over hers. Anger flared, twisting and morphing as it had the last time and she twisted her head aside. Vader followed, attempting to kiss her again. Pressing her cheeks to his, she used it to push his face away. Exhaling, her chest flush against his where she could feel his increased heart rate, she glared at him and firmly denied the attraction — and his actions.

“No. I don’t want this.”

“Yes; you do.” His hand slid from the center of her back to the back of her head, holding it in place. “Just give in to it Padmé. Don’t fight it.”

She struggled, her head rolling in his hand, but his fingers twisted in her hair as his lips settled back over hers, “No!”

“Yes.”

His lips moved against hers with the insistence, pressing into the corner of her mouth, tasting her, teasing her in such a fashion he knew she wouldn’t be able to resist him. He had the memories of the man she’d married, and he used every bit of skill and knowledge acquired in their years of marriage against her — and she succumbed.

Slowly, she capitulated, her denials losing their strength as she first stopped trying to avoid his kiss, her whispered “no” more of a plea for him not to stop than an objection to continue. The next denial was more of the same as she turned into his kiss, a passive player as he ravaged the tender flesh.

And then there were no more denials as her fingers clenched in the fabric of his shirt and she began kissing him back, opening her mouth under his to accept his kiss and participate. She swallowed his growl of approval and made a soft sound as his lips shifted from hers.

Her fogged senses cleared somewhat as his lips slid over her jaw, trailing kisses down her neck, and the words she knew she usually meant, slipped out in breathless denial. “No, not this; please, not this. I want to be away from you. This isn’t right. This has to stop. I promised you’d never touch me again.”

“Some promises,” he murmured against her skin as he reached her collar, “are meant to be broken.”

Warmth and fire spread through her system, the pleasure she found in his touch, the knowledge of where it would lead playing havoc with the emotional whirlwind she was riding. Her hands crept up his chest of their own volition even as she knew she shouldn’t, as she felt her capitulation sliding closer and closer.

Clinging to him, helpless to support herself on legs that wouldn’t work, Padmé’s head fell back as her eyes closed, the feeling of sinking registering somewhere on the periphery of her senses, too caught up in his attentions to care. Her knees touched the ground, braced on either side of his hips as his head lifted, their gazes locking. Her breathless denial flitted over his lips, holding no strength and no conviction.

“Not this one.”

Vader said nothing, his lips claiming hers once more, and in this kiss was but a token resistance before her surrender — and his.

Padmé was quiet upon returning to Vader’s quarters, deflated and beaten — both by her own needs and his. She’d succumbed to that joint power once again, only this time without the veil of anger and simmering rage that had driven their encounter before.

No; there was no explanation for her behavior other than pure, blinding lust coupled with the frustration of having her plans for escape thwarted. And even those rang hollow in her thoughts. If she were to be honest with herself — brutally honest — she’d have admitted to a second lapse from plain and simply need. But admitting she needed him in any capacity, especially such an intimate one, wasn’t something Padmé was ready to do.

To make matters worse, he’d kept his word. She’d asked, begged, him to touch her again; to remind her of everything she’d been missing. To make her forget the things she could no longer bear as reality.

That Anakin was dead and Darth Vader wore his face; that she was his captive and not his willing wife; that her children were who knew where growing up without her. That the physical oblivion the man who’d once been her husband offered was something she craved more than anything else within her reach — and she seemed powerless to help herself.

Vader, to her surprise, left her alone for the most part, making her dinner and sitting through her lack of conversation as if understanding that she was no longer giving him the silent treatment, but contemplating the undeniable shift — and there *had* been a shift — in

their relationship. Of course, he might have simply been reading her confusion and left her to stew.

It was only as dinner was finished and he watched as she mechanically loaded the cleaning unit, that he finally approached her again.

She turned her face away as his hand cupped her jaw. “Please don’t.”

“Don’t what?” The gentleness in his fingers was at odds with his firm tone. ‘Touch you? I just want to see your bruise, Padmé; make sure it’s healing well. That’s all.’ He smiled faintly, that half-smile which always made her heart twist. “No funny business; promise.”

Her throat closed, leaving her speechless, but she didn’t pull away or fight as he tilted her head this way and that, examining the remnants of the discoloration Asajj’s abuse had left on her face. He gently stroked her cheek before removing the glove from his real hand and placing the finger tips against the remaining stains.

Their gazes locked, his smile still in place, and then it disappeared as his eyes closed and the same, strange tingling feeling flowed into her face. He didn’t ask for permission as he had last time; didn’t give her the chance to argue or refuse.

She could feel the tightness evaporating as he called on the Force to heal her as he’d done previously. The tenderness under his fingers faded, the knotted clots easing and the faint throb evaporating. His brow furrowed, as if he were suddenly in pain, but the healing energies continued to flow from him to her — until Padmé grasped his wrist with her own.

“Ana-.”

His brilliant eyes opened as she cut herself off and, as before, *Anakin* was looking back at her for a brief moment and none of this nightmare had ever occurred. It couldn’t last, and in that moment, she found herself wishing it would. That they could go back and be the people they’d been. Back to the beginning; back to when he’d been a boy pinning for her attention, no matter how impossible it might be. She swallowed hard as that remnant of Anakin disappeared before her eyes, sliding back into the darkness that was Vader.

“I’m fine now.”

That icy gaze searched her face, traces of warmth making her heart ache. His thumb caressed the now unblemished skin and she pulled away, unable to continue meeting his gaze as she turned her attention back to the dishes and the leftovers. She wasn’t going to give in, but she couldn’t fight him — especially not when he managed to keep his arrogant tendencies in check and his touch was pure Anakin.

Vader stood for a long minute watching her, pain ricocheting through his body once more from the exclusive use of the Light Side of the Force. Reaching out, he brushed a strand of hair from her face, but didn’t make to kiss her again, sensing she was too conflicted to allow it — and yet not. She was volatile, which meant this could work in his favor if he played his cards right.

If he gave her the space she needed to realize what tonight meant for her denials. Fortunately, he hadn’t the will or the strength to force a confrontation just then.

Stepping back, he didn't stop until he was in the door of the kitchenette, his gaze never leaving her form. She moved with subdued purpose, her thoughts obviously inward. Gripping the edge of the door frame, he almost made to leave, but stopped himself, something she'd said during their first lovemaking session having eaten away at him for the last few days, her voice having echoed in his head despite the urgency of the Toydarian attack.

Something he knew he needed to address before he could let her go tonight. And all because he could *sense* she was receptive to it, to *him*.

"Padmé."

She stopped what she was doing, stiffening at his soft appellation, but didn't turn.

"Just so you know; you've never lost me. I've always been right here. It's just a matter of whether or not you see me... or want to."

Padmé looked up startled, meeting his gaze; a gaze that was uncharacteristically subdued. He held it for a long moment before nodding once.

"Good night, Padmé."

And then he was gone.

Striding away from his wife, Vader flinched as the echo of the Light Side use of the Force cascaded through his system. Only for Padmé would he ever dream of exposing himself once again to the raw power of the Force that way; and now he'd done it twice in a few days. It was as bad as being struck by Force lightning — worse in some ways — except he could anticipate the pain and accept it.

With long strides, he swept into his bedchamber and tugged on the clasp about his neck even as he partially shut the door. The cape was dropped carelessly at the side of his bed and he didn't even register the cool metal of the clasp under his fingers until he went to divest himself of the glove he normally wore — only to find it missing.

Now where...

Ah, right; he'd removed it in the kitchenette to touch Padmé. No loss; he had many and he could always collect it come morning. It wasn't as if it was going anywhere.

Pulling his shirt over his head, he threw it away haphazardly. The cleaning droid would get it later. His pants followed, as did the rest of his clothing, until he was naked and sliding into the bed. He exhaled a soft sigh as he lay back against the pillow and stared at the ceiling. Prone, he concentrated and the mini bursts of pain echoing through his body slowly receded and then faded away to nothing.

Without the pain as a distraction, the linger scent from the pillow drifted upwards to haunt him. The sheets had been changed but his pillow cases hadn't and still smelled of her. The fragrance he'd left in the 'fresher for her use — one she'd always favored on Coruscant — enveloped him.

It was no surprise his thought turned to the woman in the outer room. He could just barely hear her moving about as she settled for the night, but could easily imagine what she was doing. A shift of clothing and a rustle of fabric became the image of her smoothing out the blankets as she'd once done to their bed on the rare occasion he'd been there to share it. A

soft squeak and thump had him imagining her removing her boots, her deft fingers plucking the laces vigorously until they gave way and the boots submitted to gravity's pull.

He could almost *hear* her soft exclamation of delight as the pressure eased — and the discomfort was almost immediate on his end. She'd made that very same sound more than once while they'd been on the mat, or against the wall, in his training salle. *That* memory brought back the first recent memory of her back in his arms and everything that had followed. And the inevitable question:

Why?

Why would she turn from him, deny everything they'd shared after such an intense bout of lovemaking? Why would she push him away when it was so clearly an escape she needed; craved? Why did she continue to fight him even now when she *should* have been joining him in his bed at that very moment for a third trip into oblivion?

He didn't understand, didn't get it — and yet the fact that she'd capitulated so... he wouldn't call it easily, but... gracefully perhaps? — in the training salle gave him hope of such future sessions with her. She wasn't as immune to him as she seemed to think nor as she wished to be, and each time that he'd seen her shatter in his arms thus far, the burden she carried evaporated and disappeared for several precious moments.

Only to return full force when she regained her wits.

His wife was an enigma to him, far more scarred and jaded than she'd ever been when they'd last been together.

Reflecting on the past few days, he considered his options and the circumstances of each encounter.

First, he'd returned home to find Padmé asleep in his bed. The thought gave him momentary pause; with everything that had happened, he'd not fully considered that circumstance. The portent was clear and his spirits rose that much further. Padmé had been found *willingly* in his bed, albeit without him, but there none-the-less... which meant she craved his physical company.

It was a start, something to build on. It was easy enough to give her that; to give her the contact she craved when she needed it no matter that he wanted more. Having her in his bed was one of the major outcomes he'd been hoping for since he'd been reunited with her and now he found he only wanted more.

He considered the scenario of events, shying away from the argument that had led into their frenzied encounter, and focusing instead on the encounter itself. Her pleas, her accusations; her tearful entreaty for what and who he'd always been.

He considered her escape attempt and discarded it, instead focusing on their time in the training salle. She'd denied him at first, offering but a token of resistance to him — and herself — as he'd kissed her, caressed her... and taken her no further. He'd kept his promise; Padmé had *asked* for him to continue, been consciously aware of each step as he'd silently or overtly awaited her approval; her permission.

He'd loved her until she'd been boneless, unable to walk or to remember her own name; and then she'd pleaded with him again. Begged him to return when he'd never left; and he'd

simply silenced her, not wanting to hear it. His own comment to her tonight had addressed it; but would it be enough for her to accept that he hadn't changed as much as she seemed to think?

No matter what name, what mantle he wore, he'd always loved her; *would* always love her. Regardless of what else he did, *that* wouldn't and hadn't changed.

Or was that the key to this whole mess; to keep her moving towards him, however reluctantly? He didn't know. All he knew for sure was that he'd once again sampled the bliss he'd missed so deeply and thought gone forever. Somehow, someday, he needed to prevent her from sliding back into the habits she'd formed these last two years and coax her for good back into his bed.

Without realizing it, he slipped from conscious into unconscious, his mind unable to escape the topic even in slumber.

The sound of a baby crying woke her.

Disoriented, Padmé looked around the darkened room. The squalling of the young infant or toddler — perhaps two of them — turned her head this way and that.

"Luke?"

The crying intensified but at the same time grew more distant, drawing her from her warm cocoon and to her feet. Nearly tripping over obstacles she *knew* were there but seemed helpless to avoid, she stumbled to a closed door, the sound of the child's crying audible behind it.

"Leia?"

Shifting, as if drifting away, the sound retreated, and she pressed her hands frantically against the door — only to realize with sudden and piercing clarity just what door she stood before. The sound of the infant crying vanished as if it had never been and, truly, it hadn't been. Staring at the door to the office, the room suddenly all hard edges and stark clarity, Padmé began to shake.

The sound of her babies crying had been so *real*

Backing away from the door, she stumbled over a piece of furniture, going down hard and not quite catching herself against the nearby chair. Her chest heaved as the bands of grief constricted it, tightening and closing like a vice and making it difficult to breathe. Overwhelmed by the potency of the dream, she let go of the chair and slid to the floor, wrapping her arms about herself.

She wanted to be held, *needed* to be held, and her mind called out for the impossible. She wanted Anakin; but Anakin was dead. Vader lay in the next room if she wished, but she couldn't contain the shudder that shook her with the thought of turning to him. He only wanted one thing from her and she didn't want that at all!

Max! the cry rose in her mind unbidden and she closed her eyes against a powerful surge of emotion. Max had been both friend and confidant, but more than that, he'd understood that

not everything was required to be intimately physical between them. And right now, she couldn't handle the physical intimacy; *Vader* would want physical. He'd offer to sweep her away, to help her *forget* the pain the only way he knew for certain would work.

But it wasn't what she needed.

Anakin would have known what Max had needed to be taught; the value of a cuddle and the soothing power of an embrace by someone who genuinely cared for your welfare. It was what she needed and what was beyond her grasp at the moment. Vader, no matter their new intimacies, was incapable of offering the comfort she needed even if she'd been inclined to consider it.

Closing her eyes, she curled into a ball, finding what comfort she could in her own arms. Pressing her eyes to her knees, she felt the sting of tears, the ache in the back of her throat that made her gasp against the pain even as it found a meager outlet. Making no move to brush away her tears, she focused on breathing in slowly through her nose and out through her mouth in an attempt to stop the tremors.

It didn't work at first, the echo of the baby's cry still too raw and the breath left her lungs on choked, muffled gasps. For many long minutes, so many she lost track of time, she struggled to control herself. This vulnerability in Vader's quarters only left her ill prepared to deal with his overtures; overtures she could ill afford to accept and eventually escape with what little sanity she had left intact.

Uncurling from her position, exhaustion weighing heavily in her limbs and in her chest, Padmé wearily rose to her feet with the help of the chair, stifling the urge to sob with a hard swallow. Exercise. That's what she needed; something to occupy her mind and ensured she remained alert and awake. Sleep, even the paltry exhaustive states that now claimed her with jarring frequency, was no escape and she needed to avoid it at all costs.

Rubbing her face with her hands, she brushed away her tears, ran her hands over her hair and headed for the door to the suite. Let Vader sleep and dream... whatever Sith Lords dreamed about. Prisoner or not, Vader hadn't — miraculously — revoked her guard detail, simply increased it. It was this detail she employed now; where once four troopers escorted her, there were now eight. But, as she stepped away with them and the door to Vader's suite closed behind her, Padmé admitted it wouldn't have mattered if there had been ten or twenty or even a hundred.

She needed the outlet to banish the dreams and they were the only option she was willing to consider; turning to Vader for *anything* was not one.

Month Twenty Four, Day 17 PEF, morning

Author's Note: I adore the range of emotions and responses that this story has wrung... people either like it or hate it, or both *laughs* which is exactly what we were going for when we started this.

Vader's obliviousness to what Padme really wants is deliberate. When Daenarra and I started this fic, we discussed romantic love vs obsessive love... and how to show the differences. So yeah... Vader is still Vader, he's just a guy and, Force help him, really doesn't understand how or why Padme changed... or why she thinks he has.

Whee! And so it continues...

Again, Daenarra is still MIA, so I apologize for errors — they're entirely mine but the scene suggestions are hers (especially in this one...) ;)

And, for the record — this is about the length of the chapters I'm going for on a regular basis ;) Don't wanna get -too— long!

Chapter 53

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Seventeen PEF

Morning

Padmé arrived back at Vader's quarters as he was stepping out of his room, his dark hair glistening with his morning absolution even as he was doing up the tapes and fasteners on the glove of his mechanical hand. He looked up at her entrance with an unreadable expression as she stepped through the doorway and back into the suite. For a moment he'd appeared perplexed, his eyes darting to the sofa where she normally spent her night, and back

The head Trooper of her detail noted the dark lord's presence and took it upon himself to step daringly into the room with a crisp salute. "Good morning, my Lord. The Lady Vader requested our escort some four hours ago for an extended walk through the deck."

A click of his heels, a deferential salute and the closing of the door left them once again alone.

Staring at one another, Vader was the first to move, stepping towards her. She flinched and his expression hardened, but he didn't stop until he stood directly before her, his critical gaze sweeping over her face. By the way his jaw clenched, he didn't like what he saw — yet he made no move to speak. Their eyes locked and a moment of silent communication passed as Padmé did nothing to try and hide *why* she'd been out walking so early or for so long.

Tilting her chin stubbornly, she silently dared him to say something, anything and he obliged her — sort of.

“Padmé—” He knew, yet the beep of his comlink told her better than any words he’d been called away again. He frowned, his tone surprisingly solicitous. “Will you be all right?”

It was a token question, one that she knew didn’t really matter because nothing she said would keep him there even if she’d desired his company. His *Empire* had need of him. Casting him a cutting look that spoke far better than any words she might have chosen, she turned on her heel and headed for the kitchenette.

Vader’s gaze bored into the back of her skull, but he didn’t follow — which meant whatever had called him so early to the bridge was important. Important enough he couldn’t dally. The wall of the kitchenette partially blocked his view and Padmé set about getting her breakfast on auto pilot. She wasn’t hungry, not with her stomach in a state of perpetual knots, but just the action of attempting to eat kept *him* off her back

Apparently satisfied with what he saw, Vader waited until she’d chewed and swallowed the first bite of whatever she’d poured into her bowl before finally exiting the suite. She managed one more before dumping the rest in the food recycler. Sliding back into her chair, she placed her elbows on the table and her face in her hands, tightening her fingers in her hair painfully as fatigue threatened immediately to claim her.

It did the trick.

Pain radiated through her scalp, adrenaline and endorphins cascading through her system with a rush of energy that was as welcome as it was necessary. Releasing her hair, she pushed to her feet and headed back into the suite. She needed something to do, but first she intended to dare another shower while Vader was so recently departed.

It was quick and efficient but afterwards, she felt more like herself; more capable of coping with what the day would bring. Conversely, the shower had also taken her mind off her nightmare of that morning, revealing bruises and marks Vader had left on her skin she’d been oblivious to until now. Those marks had brought back the memory of his hands on her body and his lips against her pulse; the way his teeth—

The shudder that raced through her had nothing to do with cold.

Quickly, she dressed lest Vader return to find her so vulnerable before turning her attention to the room that had been her prison for two and a half weeks. She shied away from the bedroom and began to wander the lounge. Tracing her fingers over the spines of the various volumes containing holodiscs of entertainment that lined the shelves, she deliberately searched for something that would occupy her so completely she’d feel neither fatigue nor exhaustion, nor remember the heated escape of Vader’s embrace.

Titles flitted past her gaze as she cataloged his library, noting with passing interest that a lot of the material centered around Force lore, though there were quite a few classics, the odd romance — to her surprise — and enough of a diversity she wasn’t sure if he’d read everything or simply kept it for some other reason. Most of the volumes were slim, their names emblazoned across their vertical spines with precise lettering.

Except for several volumes, almost the same colors as the walls, that she'd failed to notice before, at the top of the case near his office door. A case high enough she wouldn't be able to reach the top without assistance. Her curiosity piqued, for the volumes seemed almost conspicuous in their location and size despite their plain appearance, she went searching for a make shift stool. The table by the couch seemed sturdy enough to hold her weight and, with some effort, she dragged it over.

Using the make-shift stool, she reached for the volumes, noting as she got closer that they had the appearance of books — *real* books — meaning plasfilm bound in covers. More and more curious. Reaching for the first on the left, she pulled and nearly lost her balance when the weight of the book didn't match its look. A rattling sound caught her attention as she brought it down to eye level.

No dust coated the volume, no name decorated its side or front and, as she tried to open it, found the catch wasn't in its usual place for a holonovel. Frowning, she left the other volumes where they were and settled herself on the edge of the table. A careful examination of the book which was not a book, showed a cleverly concealed spin catch under one corner and she undid it with a flick of her fingers. The satisfying *click* that resulted was almost ominous in its volume.

The cover popped open with little effort on her part to reveal several holodiscs. Unlike data discs and rods, holodiscs held a certain circular shape with beveled edge that made them unmistakable. A quick inspection showed them to be unlabeled in any way, the only notable thing about them their colors. Eight discs, one each of red, blue, green, black, white, yellow, orange and purple.

Even more curious.

Placing the 'book' aside, she climbed back onto the table and pulled down the rest of the nondescript books, stacking them on the table two at a time, but careful to leave them in the same order she found them in.

Depending on their contents, she wasn't certain she wished Vader to know she'd been snooping.

Once they'd been removed from their hiding place, for she couldn't think of any other description for their home, she systematically opened each one and found them to be as identical as the first. No names, no indications as to their contents, just eight discs, each of a different color.

Except the last volume which held just one disc — in silver.

Re-closing the cleverly designed boxes, she stacked them back into the order she'd found them, and turned to the first volume she'd opened. Retrieving the holodisc player from another shelf, she dragged the table back to the couch and settled herself more comfortably. If the discs were as full as she believed them to be, seeing as how there were ten volumes in total, not counting the last one with just the one disc, she intended to be comfortable while delving into their secrets.

She made a quick trip to get a glass of water before settling herself comfortably on the sofa. Reaching for the first disc — the black one — she popped it into the player, calling up a menu. A series of dates scrolled through with an option to replay from the entry last viewed.

Figuring it was a good place to start, and curious to see what Vader had been watching, she selected the last option and sat back.

Only to spring forward in rigid attention as her own image greeted her, a soft smile she didn't recognize on her lips. The holo was an upper body image instead of a full body, and Padmé instantly recognized the hairstyle and clothing; it had been mere days before Anakin's return to save the Chancellor from Greivous. He'd obviously received it, probably *after* their reunion when she'd told him about her pregnancy.

"—your message; I only wish you'd be able to coming back sooner," she heard herself say, the recording looking so sad she felt a twinge of remembered emotion. "*I have so much to tell you. I miss you Anakin; I'd tell you to be careful, but I know you won't. Be safe, my Jedi.*" The image reached up to close her fingers around one of the decorations that hung around her neck and Padmé's hand unconsciously followed that movement, feeling the ghost sensation of gripping the japor snippet the image had been holding.

That farewell had meant more, far more, than simply saying the words 'I love you' to either of them — not to mention safer.

Staring at the image of herself, Padmé couldn't order her thoughts. Too many questions, too many emotions — remembered and current — warred for supremacy. Reaching out, she viciously stabbed the menu function and looked at the date on the entry and confirmed her suspicion. Anakin had received the message the *day* she'd told him her news, but bare hours *before* their reunion. An indication, no doubt, of his eagerness for her messages despite the fact he had to have known he was headed for Coruscant.

Scanning back, she looked at the other dates, selecting one at random. Her image greeted her and she didn't bother to listen to the message. She selected another and then another before pulling the holodisc from the player and tossing it back in the container. Grabbing another, she went through the same process, a pattern emerging.

Every single one was a messages she'd either had delivered to Anakin by her handmaidens when she couldn't see him when he was on Coruscant — all of the messages on the blue and purple discs as far as she could tell, between a certain date range. The rest were messages she'd left for him at the apartment — the last of the discs except the black disc — knowing he was going to be there and she'd be back later. None of the information had been lost and the data had been preserved and, as such, each disc held ten messages.

The black disc held official and encrypted correspondences — things that they'd daringly included as a way of communication when he was in the field and she'd found some official excuse to send him a note — or vice versa. They'd been careful, so careful some of the encryptions had taken Artoo or Threepio several hours to decode even with their personal decryption key set.

Her gaze traveled to the rest of the 'books', a peculiar feeling centered in her chest just knowing that this box was just the beginning — or rather the ending. Every message, few as they were, had been sent in the last few months leading up to the end of the clone war. Her eyes went to where she'd found them, that peculiar feeling spreading as she realized that she'd aptly coined their place.

These boxes, these treasure troves of secret messages were still being hidden and watched, as evident by the last times viewed, in secret; but why?

Why hide them?

With a shake of her head, Padmé placed the discs back in the box and set it aside, shifting the ‘books’ until she found the fourth one. Opening it, she selected the black disc again and placed it into the holoplayer. Selecting the first message, she sat back.

“Greetings Jedi Skywalker,” her image was younger, dressed in the combat fatigues she’d worn on various missions, her tone formal. *“I contact you now at the reque—”* stabbing the fast forward button, she hit the end of the official message — she didn’t really care to watch herself be all stiff and formal — and stopped fast forwarding near the end. *“-st haste. I look forward to your reply.”*

The image shook, indicating it had been decoded, and her appearance changed. Gone was the stiff senator doing her duty for the republic and in her place, while still dressed in her fatigues, was a woman wearing an almost impish smile.

“Threepio tells me I’m taking too many risks doing this, but I had to send you more than just official business; I can’t wait to see you. These past months have been too long with you gone. I know you’re well — I see the reports — but I miss you all the more for them. See you soon, my Jedi.” The image’s hand went to the center of her chest, as if gripping the japor, then looked slightly sheepish and froze that way.

Padmé’s lips had kicked into a reluctant half smile. She’d been so naive then, so full of dreams and love and hopes for her and her husband. She’d believed them to be invincible, that together they’d be able to take on the galaxy — and win. Stopping the message, she popped the disc free and placed it back in the case. She watched two more from that series — about midway point through their marriage — one a playful note she’d left him, almost saucy in its promises, another a worried inquiry due to a report she’d seen on his latest exploits and the reported injuries.

Going to the last ‘book’ in the stack, she pulled free the silver disc and turned it over in her hands, wondering what message she’d ever sent him deserved such a place of honor. Sliding it into the player, she was surprised to find no menu function, just a simple request as to if she’d like to watch it from the point last viewed.

Selecting ‘yes’ she started to settle back, and stopped, staring wide eyed at the holo before her, elation and misery rising like bile and tears in her throat.

A young Anakin, his padawan braid hanging conspicuously over his shoulder and down his back, turned to face her image with a soft smile. Her own image, her visage framed by white and flowers, smiled back, tilting her face to his as her eyes closed and their lips met.

Their wedding.

It was a holo she knew well, one she’d watched a hundred thousand times when he was gone; she owned the twin of this very disc. Or rather, *had* owned the twin. It had been with her personal effect in her apartment at 500 Republica and, once she’d gone to chase Anakin at Mustafar, she’d never seen any of them again.

It had been a mixed blessing.

A silver disc; the beginning of their life together — the only disc that deserved a place on its own, where as the rest of the ‘books’... tears smarted behind her eyes as she realized this was the sum total of the relationship she and Anakin had worked so hard on — and ultimately failed at.

Ten ‘books’ to hide it.

Seventy three holodiscs to record it

Seven hundred and twenty messages to maintain it.

And one wedding and its holodisc that started it all.

Anakin had been show the holo by Artoo, something the droid had recorded without being asked, and made the copies; his wedding gift to them both. Something, he’d told her, that they could have and hold when they couldn’t be together. It had been touching at the time and torture later when his fate had been uncertain during the war.

She began to shake as the wedding holo began to replay without prompting, this time from the beginning, the immediate swell of emotion that had always accompanied watching the holodisc blocking her throat and making it impossible to speak even if she’d wanted to. Her heart pounded in her chest with the memories the holovid returned; the anticipation, the joy; the *love* that had been between them and impossible to deny.

And suddenly, with the speed of a ship entering hyperspace, a yearning for Anakin as he’d been in the video — for that unassuming and conflicted, but loyal, young man — slammed through her. If she’d been on her feet, it would have driven her to her knees.

Anakin.

Reaching towards the holo without thinking, she clenched her fist before she could disturb the image, which was now a close up of his face as he said his vows. He’d been so young, so *serious*, when saying them, his voice shaking as he’d struggled not to stammer. Padmé hadn’t cared; she’d stammered and laughed her way through, letting him see her joy in the tears that had been shining in her eyes.

As they shone in her gaze now, but refused to be let loose. Sticking her fisted hand against her lips, she muffled the sob that threatened to escape

The holo reached the end, paused for a few seconds and then began to loop back, as it had been programmed to, to the beginning. And so it began again, the record of the most memorable and joyful day of her life. Just watching him, watching herself, so *certain* they could beat the odds so long as they were together, was enough to make her heart break all over again.

This was the Anakin she wanted so much beside her once more; the determined pursuer who’d known his heart’s desire and refused to relinquish it even in the darkest of moments; the bashful young admirer who charmed her with gifts and actions that made her laugh and sigh; the ardent lover who gave everything without exception and accepted her as she was — flaws and all. *This* was the man she’d have given anything — *anything!* — to have back in that moment. *This* was the man she’d lost when Vader had taken him away... and this was the man she so yearned to see again.

And did as the holo once more played through.

The image of him, laughing and smiling and so *carefree* in his elation of their actions was a painful kick to the ribs each time. Yet she continued to watch, the images she knew so well scrolling before her eyes again and again. It wasn't until the fourth viewing she began to notice the rest of the details of Varykino; the terrace, the trees and the water.

Other memories assailed her; the ever so brief honeymoon that had felt like a magical and forbidden escape; her time as Queen, when Anakin had still been a boy and one of the few people to accept her as she was and not as the monarch. Times with her family; vacations to the very spot where she would one day say her wedding vows; swimming in those clear waters as she'd once told Anakin.

Naboo was forbidden to her, a part of her past she could never reclaim — just like Anakin.

Unable to bear it a second longer, she punched the button to eject the disc and all but threw it back into its hiding place. With jerky motions, she rose to her feet and gave the table a violent push back to the shelf. Gathering up the 'books' she stepped to the table top and placed them back where she'd found them, starting with the 'book' containing the wedding disc.

Since Anakin's... since his *turn* to the darkside, she'd had no way and no cause to see it and suddenly regretted that she had. It had brought back unwelcome feelings and sensations she'd been desperately trying to suppress. Longings for places and people now denied to her; for the family and friends she'd left behind. For her sister Sola and her understanding council; for her father's firm embrace and her mother's soothing smile; for the winds and waters of Naboo and the cultured atmosphere of the people she'd been so long without.

All things now denied her.

It would have been better if she'd never found them, never torn open a wound that had never fully healed. And so she would do just that; forget she'd ever found them; forget she'd once again seen everything she'd lost so tragically.

Forget, but not forget, thanks to the *monster* who wore his face.

Settling the 'books' back in their hiding place, she lowered her gaze from them in an effort to stop her trembling, gripping the top lip of the shelf — which brought her gaze in line with a vase sitting on the next shelf down. The sweeping lines and subtle turns marked it as something from her home world.

As if in a dream, her fingers uncurled from the lip of the shelf and slid around the smooth, almost satin-like exterior of the vase. The delicate artistry, the symmetry and sheer beauty of the piece was enough to put her in the mind for meadows and streams the color of the tips. Turning it over in her hands, doubting the sensations under her finger tips, Padmé examined the vase carefully for some sign of it being a fake; a replica.

But, even as she did so, she knew it to be untrue.

Vader, she'd already seen, had several items in the room that came from Naboo. She'd done her best to ignore them, but peripherally she'd been aware of their existence and their origin. Now, with the holo of their wedding so firmly entrenched in her mind and the

knowledge that she would never again see the quiet majesty of those lakes and hills, she could no longer ignore them.

They practically jumped out at her as she placed the vase carefully back on the shelf and turned to survey the apartment.

There, just to her left on the wall was a small piece of artwork from the Gungan tribes Anakin had been exposed to through Jar Jar. The shelving, if she wasn't mistaken, was made from the trees of the hardwood forests to the North of Varykino; and by the artisans in the small villages that inhabited them.

The holos she'd been idly studying before caught her attention, and she could now identify that all but two — except for the volumes on Force lore — were made in various locations around Naboo by Nabooian producers. She was even certain, if she dared to look again, that his bed had been made in the city where she grew up and his sheets were of fine Naboo cotton-silk.

Stepping off the table — and that too was of Naboo origin — she pushed it back into place even as her gaze fell on the artwork that littered the salon. One image in particular drew her attention — an excellent rendering of the falls where she and Anakin had once share a picnic lunch when they'd gone into hiding during their reunion and courtship. Her heart squeezed painfully and she moved to the viewport, putting her back to the collection and its significance.

Vader had amassed a large collection of artworks and genuine items from her home world, surrounded himself with them. So immersed, she couldn't help but feel the painful jab of recognition; he had no doubt amassed his collection because of her and the one place, other than the Jedi Temple, that he had ever dared to call home.

Bitterness crept in along the outer edges of that thought — a musing she couldn't help; would he bother with more now that she was there to complete the collection?

Despite the ire she felt at the thought of being considered along the same lines as a piece of art, she found she couldn't decide as to which she would prefer — and that was more disturbing than the question itself.

Month Twenty Four, Day 17 PEF, evening

Welcome to new readers! Always glad to see someone new jump in to give this a try...

Daenarra is still MIA, I'm hoping she makes an appearance here pretty quick since we're coming up on a part of the story we were both so excited about!

What can I say — I miss her feedback and input too!

Chapter 54

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Seventeen PEF

Evening

The day passed Padmé by without her noticing, so caught up in memories and regrets, her gaze focused on the atmosphere of Toydaria — so like Naboo's — that she was unable to escape.

She missed lunch. Didn't hear the door chime or when Artoo come in; didn't hear the little droid query her or feel the pull of his gripping arm as he tugged at the back of her shirt in an attempt to gain her attention. She didn't hear him leave or notice the guards look in before the door once again sealed her inside.

Nothing penetrated the wash of raw emotion upon which she rode.

As if mesmerized, she watched the clouds play along the outer edges below the upper layers, and in them she saw everything she'd left behind. Her family and friends, her station, her people; everything she'd sacrificed to be with the man she'd loved... and in the end had sacrificed for nothing.

Pressing one hand against the viewport, she found herself wondering if her family had received the first — and only — message she'd ever sent after awakening from her coma. Terse and to the point, with no return frequency, it had been an encoded burst her sister would have been able to decrypt. It hadn't been long but even now she could remember the content:

"Sola, I know you'll get this before mom and dad, so prepare them, okay? Contrary to popular belief I am alive and well — but I can't come home. Not now; maybe not ever. There's something important... so very important, I have to do — but I have to do it alone. Please don't search for me; you won't find me because... I don't want to be found. I love you all very much, but I'm not sorry for what I have to do. Trust me when I say it's better this way. Please forgive me."

At the time she'd been so focused on finding the twins and making Vader pay for every last hurt, she'd felt it necessary to cut all ties with her family. Now, for the first time ever, she

found she was wondering if she shouldn't have tried to soften the blow more than she had. Hindsight was always clearer and she found she didn't relish the fact she'd deliberately inflicted such pain; especially since she'd never be able to apologize.

A sudden and painful yearning for home made her flinch, her gut clenching with such force she gasped, her fingers sliding from the pane before her to clench at her side. She craved the support of her parents, to be sheltered and protected from Vader's evil and machinations. Wishing with all her heart she could climb into the protective circle of her father's arms and be a child again. Yearned to have them take all of this away, to lean on them as she'd refused to lean on anyone in a long time; to have that unconditional acceptance reaffirmed.

And, for the first time, she regretted having cut those ties.

If she'd succeeded in her mission to find her children, they would never have known their grandparents, aunt and uncle, cousins or the multitude of friends her family maintained. They'd never have known the safe environment Padmé had entertained while growing up a carefree child, secure in the knowledge of her parent's love and acceptance; everything she'd willingly turned her back on. It would have been too obvious and dangerous to take them to Naboo, to even inform her parents of their existence.

So deep was she in thought that Padmé never heard the door open to the suite.

"No, sir; she's been inside since this morning."

"Very good Commander. As you were."

"Yes sir!"

The door closed as Vader entered the suite.

"Padmé?"

There was no answer to his query, but he had a good idea as to where he'd find her. Striding through the room, he was unsurprised to see her standing at one of the viewports. The gamut of emotion she exuded was so convoluted, he ignored it, focused instead on his own intentions.

His plans had been set in motion to find their children and he'd had promising reports of three leads being followed up on; he *hoped* to have something to present her with soon. Of course, first he had to reestablish their link as husband and wife so she'd willingly accept his help. They'd started, he believed, reconnecting on a physical level that was both gratifying and frustrating.

Still, after that last turn in the training salle and the subdued way she'd reacted to him last night, he was certain he'd touched upon a strategy that would lead her back to him.

Yes, she was still sleeping on the sofa, but he knew that would change; her need for the oblivion he could give her was too great.

Satisfied — even *happy*— with their progress, he was glad she was up despite the turmoil she felt. Now that they’d started down the path to reestablishing their marriage, he was certain he could make her feel better in more ways than one; some were simply more enjoyable.

Coming up behind her, Vader wrapped his arms about her waist and pulled her to him even as he stepped forward. Padmé immediately stiffed at the contact but Vader, determined not to fight with her, ignored it. Breathing her deeply into his lungs, he bent his head to her shoulder and placed his chin upon it. Seeing what she was seeing, he observed the lazy swirl of the crystal blue atmosphere below and smiled.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it? It reminds me of Naboo.”

A surge of hurt that was unmistakable to miss through the Force as Padmé pulled herself from his arms and shifted away, her gaze never leaving the blue orb below. She didn’t answer him. Narrowing his gaze, Vader examined her for a moment before deliberately reminding himself he wasn’t here to fight with her; yet, the way she kept pulling away from him was frustrating beyond measure. Doing his best to keep his exasperation out of his tone, he couldn’t let her mood pass.

“All right, what’s wrong?”

Padmé didn’t respond.

“Padmé.”

There was another long silence in which he was starting to think she wouldn’t answer him — and then her voice, soft and pained, almost introspective, reached him.

“...I was just thinking about Naboo.” Her head came up, those brown eyes spearing him with an almost unreadable look. “You have quite the collection of items from there.”

Delighted she’d finally commented on it, he smiled. “I was wondering when you would notice.”

Padmé’s gaze shifted back out the viewport. “I’ve tried not to.”

It was not the answer he’d been expecting.

Gratitude, maybe, for helping her feel more at home; or perhaps vindication that he’d loved her enough to honor her home world. Even surprise or anger would have been welcome and not unexpected; but not indifference. Unable to understand her reaction, he couldn’t help himself.

“Why?”

There was another long silence as Padmé continued to examine the clouds in the atmosphere below, finally looking at him for a brief moment before looking around the living room. Now that she’d acknowledged his collection, Vader could see she was having a hard time *not* seeing it.

She waved at the room, a touch of anxiety slipping into her voice. “Why do you have to have all this stuff?”

He blinked.

Why?

Was she *serious*?

A quick look into her anxious face told him he was. He pinned her with a look that dared her to doubt his sincerity. “It was to remind me of you, at first. When I thought you were dead I had to have something. I couldn’t let your memory slip away. So, I started my collection.” Stepping close to stand before her, he searched her gaze before directing her attention to the painting on the opposite wall. “That I acquired shortly before Asajj brought you here.”

Looking at the painting, Padmé visibly bristled before returning her gaze to glare at him. “And what, I’m just the latest piece in your collection?”

Unable to help himself, he smirked, amused by her question even as he felt it deserved a sincere reply. He stepped closer, lifting one hand to cup her cheek as he dropped his tone intimately: “Of course not; you’re my wife.”

Dipping his head, he leaned in to kiss her. Padmé jerked away, tearing herself from his grasp and backing away along the viewport until there were several feet between them once more. Her retreat rankled, irritating and frustrating him to no end.

“Don’t do this.”

“Do what?”

“Shut me out.”

The look she shot him was incredulous. “If you think, even for a second, that I’m going to open myself up to you in *anyway*, you’re crazy.”

Closing the distance between them once more and feeling a bit like a hunter stalking his prey, Vader modulated his tone into a verbal caress — one that had worked when they’d been together in the past. “You might as well. We’ve already made love — *twice*.”

She shied from his gaze, directing hers back out the viewport again and it amused him to practically *see* her struggling with herself even as it irritated him to realize she didn’t *want* to remember. A smug smile crossed his features as he leaned closer, the irritation vanishing under the realization that, as much as Padmé was trying to deny what had happened between them, she couldn’t ignore it.

A denial spilled from her lips in a short, breathless way that screamed desperation even as she edged back another step. “That was *not* us making love!”

“Oh.” He *almost* chuckled, baiting her. “Then what would you call it?”

Watching her with a shrewd gaze, Vader saw the byplay of emotion careen across her face. A myriad of feelings that were mirrored in the Force which all ended the same: dismay. However or whatever she *wanted* to call it, he was gratified to see that she couldn’t put it into words; which meant he was right.

“Padmé,” his tone was short of mocking as he shook his head with a tsk, calling her bluff.

Anger spiked in her expression as the cold glare he’d become accustomed to since her return to him snapped back into her gaze “That was *not* us making love.”

“Then answer my question. Or do we need to try again to get it right?”

Her pulse leapt at his words, visible at the junction in her neck, the surge of a brief emotional response quickly extinguished and muffled but powerful. Even as she looked away, back to the planet, Vader could feel she was tempted; a temptation that was ruthlessly extinguished by her determination.

A pity.

It was no surprise the firmness in her tone when she answered his question — or the negative way in which she did. He read it in her body language before the word crossed her lips.

“No.”

Changing tactics, Vader hadn’t been a General for nothing, he leaned his hip against the slight protrusion at the viewport’s base and crossed his arms over his chest, watching her watch the planet. A powerful and sudden surge of emotion — grief mixed with guilt — swamped him, taking him by surprise. Her hands clenched, her jaw tightened and her posture went rigid as she struggled against the emotional burden, a burden Vader wished she’d share beyond the emotions she couldn’t mask.

Studying her carefully, he watched the shifts in her expression and deliberately read the emotional nuances the Force fed him. Grief was nothing new, it was a constant companion to her, but the guilt... the guilt was new. Delving further, he found it intertwined with more than just grief. A yearning that had little to do with the maternal instincts regarding their twins; some yes that was entwined with regret, but mostly he could feel the need for companionship and *acceptance* of those who wouldn’t pry or judge.

She yearned, he realized with a sudden and startling clarity, for her family.

All this talk of Naboo and her sudden awareness of his collection must have triggered a homesickness he was more than able to empathize with; he well remembered how badly he’d missed his mother during his first years of training. Now, with her surrounded by the treasures that would remind her daily, it was no wonder she felt a sudden yen for their company. She hadn’t yet mentioned them, beyond a passing mention during their discussion as to where the twins might be — a vehement denial and affirmation that stuck him even now.

His examination must have penetrated her contemplation because her demand when she spoke was flat and devoid of emotion — and she didn’t turn to look his way.

“What?”

He closed the distance between them, stopping just at arm’s length, studying her face, his own expression thoughtful. “You miss them, don’t you?”

The query in her eyes, laced with derision and a sudden shift in her emotions warned him that she hadn’t followed his train of thought; she believed him to be speaking of the twins.

“Your family.” He smiled faintly, shaking his head and clarifying; he knew better than to state such an obvious fact about their children. “Your emotions are centered on them. I can feel it. I’m surprised; you haven’t said much about them.”

"I wouldn't have said anything if you hadn't pushed," her response was immediate, given without thought as she considered his comment — and her shoulders sagged slightly. "There's no reason to say more anyway. I can't go home. I can't see them."

His brows drew together. Couldn't see them? Didn't she realize all she has to do was ask? "You can see them, but only if I'm with you. I don't trust you to not try and get away from me after yesterday. And I already told you you're not leaving my side again."

"Don't flatter yourself." Her withering look clearly said he was an idiot. "That's not why."

"Then fill me in."

There was a moment of hesitation on her part, a visible conflict that crossed her face as she struggled with the idea; and seemed to decide it was better to answer his question than not. *What harm*, he could almost hear her thoughts, *would it do for him to know?*

"A little while after I left the Alliance I sent my family a message telling them I was alive and well. I told them I wasn't coming home; I couldn't. I knew you'd look for me there if you ever found out I was alive. I couldn't put them in jeopardy." Her look turned condescending and pointed, almost vicious. "I also told them I had something very important to take care of."

Not one to let that kind of challenge pass, he shot a near identical look right back at her. "Indeed you did."

Padmé turned away first, back to the viewport, bracing her hands on the ledge. "I told them not to look for me, that I'd be fine."

Staring at her, he wondered how she could have possibly thought they wouldn't and hadn't. No matter how strong she'd always been, her family, like him, loved her. Not searching for her would have been impossible; and it was obvious she didn't know. Letting a couple of heart beats of silence pass between them, he braced one hand on the viewport, watching her keenly, and offered her the information in an off-handed fashion.

"But they did."

A horrified expression of disbelief crossed her face as she looked his way and the unspoken question in her eyes needed no voice.

"Sola did, anyway." He continued, meeting her gaze squarely so she could judge his sincerity for herself. "It must have been right after you contacted them. In fact, it was right after the attack on Carida. She sent me a transmission asking me if I knew where you were. She figured if anyone would know where to find you, I would."

Padmé rubbed her forehead with one hand, her manner distracted and somber. "She knew how we felt about each other."

Vader let the acknowledgement of him as Anakin pass without comment and instead continued with the conversation thread, his gaze never wavering from her expression. "She alluded to that. I never did reply." Padmé's hand dropped as she regarded him with uncertain curiosity. He clarified. "Knowing you were alive, I wanted to find you for myself; not somebody else."

She broke eye contact, looking away, and contempt edged her words. "Like I said, I'm just the latest piece to your collection."

Closing the gap between them with a single stride, he pulled her into his embrace, one hand grasping her waist, the other cupping her face in a gentle but implacable hold. “Never.” Staring down into her upturned face, he knew his tone was ragged with the edge of emotion but didn’t care; she had to be made to see that she wasn’t just an object to him — a thing. Gently stroking her cheek with his thumb, he steadily held her gaze. “You’re not, Padmé. You’re much more and you know that.”

They stared at one another and he could see her searching his gaze for something. What, he wasn’t sure, but whatever she saw made her shake her head slowly.

“I’ll never be what you want. No matter how hard you try and make it happen.”

“You’re so sure about that. After what’s happened between us?”

She turned her head, pushing against his chest in an effort to escape his grasp, but now that she was there, he was loathe to allow it. His fingers dug into her hip, reminding him yet again just how thin she was, how insubstantial to the woman she’d once been; yet her fire remained undiminished as her gaze shot sparks at him, her tone hard as durasteel.

“I told you that was a mistake. It never should have happened, *either time*.”

Releasing her waist, he cupped her face in both hands, his voice thick with memory. “But it did.”

The shift in his grip allowed her to break free, her eyes having taken on the hard edge of her tone once more. “And I swear to you: it will never happen again.”

He wasn’t so sure. Now that the dam had been broken, she was susceptible to him; she’d been tractable in his hold more than once and he intended it should happen again. A cocky half smile crossed his lips. “We’ll see.”

Something in his expression triggered an unexpected reaction; Padmé stood staring at him, a stricken look suddenly crossing her face before whirling on the ball of one foot and heading out of the lounge. His grin disappeared as Vader followed her.

“Padmé?”

There was no answer and he lengthened his stride as the sound of the door opening reached him.

Padmé was standing in the doorway speaking with the Commander of her guard detail, obviously requesting their presence. The Commander nodded, giving her one index finger — the universal sign for one minute — before stepping back to allow the door to close.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Padmé whirled, looking at him, *through* him, before beginning to pace in front of the door. Hurt rolled off her in waves, confusion and desperation adding an ominous flavor to the Force readings he was receiving. Stopping near the door to the kitchenette, Vader regarded her with concerned irritation. He didn’t appreciate the way she’d abruptly ended their conversation.

“I need... I’m going for a walk,” she told him disjointedly, her agitation making her stammer as she struggled for words. “Don’t try to stop me; I can’t do... I... I need... to get out of here.”

Studying her, his irritation was fading as the door chime sounded and she turned back to the door, stabbing the activation switch with barely restrained force. The Commander came back into view and Vader strode forward until he was several steps behind Padmé, listening in.

“My Lady, as you requested, we— My lord!” The Commander saluted.

“As you were, Commander.”

“Lady Vader has requested our escort around the deck, sir; with your permission?”

Vader glanced at his wife, fully intending to tell the Commander that his services were not needed and had opened his mouth to do just that, when the expression in Padmé’s gaze caught and held him. There was a plea in their depths he couldn’t ever remember seeing before; a desperation and desolation that gave him pause. She needed this; needed to escape and, even without the Force, he could sense her fragility in that moment.

What he chose to do with it might possibly set her against him for good. If he let her go, however, there was a chance, however slim, that she might prove grateful. Instead of denying her request, he inclined his head to her fractionally, never taking his gaze from hers.

“Very well, Commander,” he informed the clone without looking at him. “Guard her well; she’ll let you know when she’s ready to return.”

“Yes, sir. My lady?”

Padmé whirled and was gone without so much as a thank you, flight evident in her every movement before the door closed behind her. Frowning, Vader considered what he’d just seen; not that his wife had fled from him, but what had been in her eyes just moments before.

Hurt.

Something he’d done in those last moments by the window had hurt her — yet, try as he might, he couldn’t for the life of him understand what. Yes, his words had been a taunt, perhaps a trifle arrogant, but they’d been filled honest promise; a promise that shouldn’t have triggered that kind of reaction.

No; after a brief reflection he was certain the hurt had come after his statement, as she’d been staring at him. What then, he wondered, had been so wounding as to send her running as if her life depended on it?

There was no answer forthcoming and the silence in the room was suddenly overpowering, the feeling of emptiness her absence left, unsettling. Taking the two steps to the door, he left the suite. Without Padmé there to hold him, there was no reason to stay — especially not where there was work that could be done to pass the time while she was out.

Heading for his office on the bridge, he turned his thoughts to other matters, one of which being the most expedient way to banish the sorrow from his wife’s gaze. With the leads his investigators were following, he *hoped* for word — and if he didn’t have it yet, perhaps he could find new ways to motivate them.

Month Twenty Four, Day 18 PEF

Author's Note: So I've been sent quite a few comments about how the twins story line has been 'lost'... let me assure you, it hasn't been... Padmé is simply unable to do anything and she's refused Vader's help... Vader, as I'm sure you've all noticed, is working towards finding them in his own way... it's not lost, I promise; it's simply in the background at the moment until they can find more common ground.

On another note — I apologize for the delay in getting this up; my husband and I were celebrating our anniversary — it was more important ;)

Lastly; the mid-September update will not be on the 16th as I will be on vacation for it; If I can I'll update when I get back, but be warned the update after the 1st may not be until the beginning of October.

Thanks for reading, guys :)

Chapter 55

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Eighteen PEF

Inactivity was one of the galaxy's great equalizers, or so Padmé had discovered over the course of the last weeks as Vader's captive.

He'd been gone upon her return to the suite the night before and she'd settle into her nest on the couch with a holo novel one of her security detail had been kind enough to lend her. With her excursions now occurring at all hours of the night, and the clones more than aware that Vader slept while she didn't, they'd offered her bits of their personal stores as ways to pass the time.

Two holo novels, one holovid and a stack of data discs that held various games she could play on any datapad.

The gesture had been greatly appreciated and quietly concealed; Padmé wasn't about to put the troopers of her security detail in danger for giving her something to do. She'd been so absorbed by the games, she hadn't heard Vader rise or leave the suite — a blessing in disguise.

After how they'd parted yesterday evening, she wasn't yet ready to face him; not after that devastating grin had played sweet havoc with her heart. It had been such an... an *Anakin* expression she'd panicked. No, that wasn't the right word. After everything they'd done and the discovery of their wedding holo tied to the talk about her family, she'd been devastated.

Devastated to realize that, more and more, the line between Vader and Anakin was blurring.

Vader was still Vader; ruthless and without compassion, a murderer beyond redemption. Yet, there were moments — like when he'd grinned at her with that almost boyishly cocky expression, his eyes alight with mischief and certainty — he could have been Anakin. Or rather he *was* Anakin. For all she hated what Vader had done, it was Anakin's touch she felt in his hands; Anakin's kiss she felt in his lips — and it was slowly destroying her in a completely different fashion than the twin's absence.

It had taken hours for her to calm down once that surge of pain had blossomed. Her honor guard had given her space, but not too much space, changing once while she was out blindly walking the same corridors. She'd ended up in the recreation room but was too agitated to use it effectively. The training salle had been avoided, the memories of her encounter with Vader all but overwhelming.

Now, almost sixteen hours later, she felt somewhat restored.

The night had been tough, with sleep trying to claim her from the games and books she'd struggled to focus on, the echo of her last nightmares always loudest in the midnight hours. For once, thinking of the twins had been as much an escape as it was a torture. An odd way to view the fact her children had been taken and hidden without her consent, but a new and novel outlook none the less.

It didn't last and the confusion and agony had intertwined to make it a rougher night than usual.

She hadn't succumbed to sleep and her eyes smarted, her limbs heavy with fatigue, as she opened the door to the suite and smiled at the Commander. "Good morning, Commander."

"Good morning, my Lady. Do you require your escort?"

She was relieved when he didn't call her Lady Vader; she didn't think she could handle it at that moment. "I'd like to use the recreation room; that *is* on my list of approved areas, is it not?" It galled her to have to ask, but the Commander simply inclined his head, making it less offensive.

"It is, my Lady. Are you ready now?"

"Whenever you are, Commander."

It took maybe a minute for the Commander to call in the other troopers and Padmé was able to leave. Passing through the corridors she now knew intimately thanks to extended walks around and around, she led the way unerringly to the recreation room. The troopers spread out to guard both entrance doors as she palmed open the main one and paused in the doorway.

"Commander?"

"Yes, my Lady?"

"I may be a while."

"We'll be here," he told her, his tone reassuring despite the fact it was his duty. "Take as long as you need."

She inclined her head with a tight smile as she stepped into the recreation room. She'd take no fewer than ten steps before a sound caught her attention. The soft foot falls of someone landing, moving through a series of smooth footwork drills and then abruptly stopping. Another muffled thump and they resumed. A frown pulled at her lips as she moved more cautiously into the room, stopping at the corner that would lead to the practice mat she'd intended to use.

A bare chest, glistening with sweat and rippling with muscle greeted her disapproving gaze.

She froze, caught in the tableau of movement as it suddenly ceased. Feet planted, arms raised for balance, eyes closed, his hair sticking in gilded curls across his neck, shoulders and forehead, it was an image that made her heart constrict and the air squeeze from her lungs.

Her fingers curled tightly around the edge of the wall, her gaze glued to the man before her as he moved smoothly from the position he was in, his arms extending with flawless concentration to reach, his foot sliding along the padded floor for balance. The position lasted barely a breath before it was smoothly transitioned into another, his hands clenching, as if pulling himself forward, his whole body in the motion as he moved with it only to have his hands end, elbows bent with his forearms extended, at his sides.

Like water, he flowed from one position to the next; Padmé's breathing became a shallow, almost non-existent experience as the scene before her overlaid with another.

The walls melted away to become a darkened cityscape on the verge of dawn, the mat a stone terrace littered with fountains, low stairs and benches; only the man within the tableau didn't change or shift. He remained as he was; shirtless, his tanned and muscled skin gleaming with health and sweat, his hair curling across his shoulders.

Anakin at his katas.

It was one of her most cherished memories; something that had been hers and hers alone — something she'd delighted in catching him at when he'd been able to spend the night before returning to the temple. She'd never asked what excuses he gave for his night time absences and, truth be told, she'd never much cared. It was enough that he'd been willing to take the risk, to make the time to be with her... to make time for *them*. Often he'd caught her watching and, with a little ingenuity, had landed them in a secluded enough position to take advantage of her one last time before—

Her throat closed completely, blocking off what little air she'd been able to filter into a system that had become paralyzed. Spinning on her heel, she made to leave, overcome by the memories and the reality of her current situation. Vader did Anakin's katas; not even those were sacred. It was like taking a knife to the chest after being kicked in the stomach.

"Padmé."

She froze in her position, not having yet taken a step, his voice calling to her from around the corner as it had so often in the past. He'd known she was there; known she was watching. Tears threatened and she pressed a fisted hand to her mouth as she stifled a sob, taking a shaky breath in an attempt to loosen the constriction in her lungs and throat.

"I know you're there, my love."

His voice was silky smooth as always, holding that same note of teasing it always had when she'd been caught red handed. She exhaled a shaky breath, closing her eyes as she struggled for composure, praying he'd give her a moment more to regain it and knowing he would not. Anakin hadn't; why would Vader?

True to form, a metallic hand closed around her upper arm barely a moment later to gain her attention, sliding downwards as he neared. "Padmé?"

Her eyes snapped open, drawn to his, the icy blue of Vader's eyes ever a match for Anakin's. She took a half step back, as much to get away from him as to get away from her own fanciful musings; to get away from the insidious deception of his appearance. She couldn't afford to succumb to it, to forget he'd as good as murdered the man she loved.

"Let me go."

As if to be contrary, his fingers closed a fraction more about her arm, now at her wrist, the metal of his finger cool against the skin despite his recent exertions. She tugged on her arm, but his hold was unbreakable.

"I said, let me go!"

He seemed not to hear her, only the tightening of his fingers and the sharpening of his gaze betrayed him; his words however, were almost teasing. "You were ever catching me on the terrace; do you think to do the same here? As unspoken an invitation now as it was then?"

"I meant no such thing," she snapped, prying at the grip on her arm with her other hand. "I didn't even know you were here; if I had I never would have come!"

"No?" Easing his grip on her arm, he stepped closer. "I don't believe you."

He smelled of sweat, man and musk and a scent so wholly Anakin's that that it enveloped her, casting her back into the past and lending an almost frantic edge to her retreat. Wrenching her arm free, she stumbled backwards and away. After yesterday's moment and now this, she was so unbalanced, she struggled to find solid ground; ground that suddenly seemed to have no more substance than sand.

He's not Anakin, she kept reminding herself, using it like a talisman, a mantra against her own overworked imagination. *He killed younglings, children as old as yours would be now — he's not Anakin!* Straightening her shoulders and finding strength in the reminder, Padmé tilted her chin. It took a moment before her lips would follow her commands, but when they did, she found she had a thread of control — and used it to attack.

"Then don't believe me," she told him hotly. "I didn't even know you *did* katas."

"Liar; you've seen me do them plenty of times."

"I saw *Ana*—"

His gaze narrowed, sharpening, something in his eyes cutting her off, his voice slicing softly across hers. "I grow weary of this argument, Padmé; I am who I've always been. You simply refuse to see it."

"What I refuse to see is how a monster who *murdered* children has anything to do with the man who so *wanted* them for himself!"

It was as if she'd slapped him, a flicker of something dangerous in his gaze bringing her back onto an even keel, finding purchase as Vader asserted himself so completely over the facets of Anakin that had risen to the surface. With the monster back in control, so was she.

"What you refuse to see is that the man you married was a man who would *do* anything, *sacrifice* anything, for *your* continued well being."

"My continued well being is best served as far away from you as can be!"

She made to leave, but his hand on her arm stopped her, spinning her back towards him.

"Without me, you're dead, Padmé," he told her evenly, only the glitter of anger in his eyes and the hard undertone in his voice betraying his ire. "If that means keeping you here by force and enlisting the aid of every single individual and droid on this ship to do so, then so be it."

Tearing her arm free, she glared frostily at him. "I should never have let Artoo bring me back here."

"Let Artoo?" Now he sounded amused. "You don't 'let Artoo' do anything; he knows you're safer here with me regardless of what you might think."

"Then he's misinformed and I intend to fix it. If he knew how you were treating me, he'd have plotted the quickest course away and never have brought me back."

"He knows," Vader's lips thinned, something in his expression indicating displeasure, but not, she suspected, at her. "He wouldn't have had to make his loyalties as plain if you hadn't forced the issue."

"I wouldn't've had to force the issue if you would just let me go."

"Never," his eyes glittered dangerously. "You're mine."

"You're no better than the slave masters of Tatooine," she snapped back. "I'm not a possession and I refuse to stay where I have no wish to be."

"I've made you do nothing that you have not been a full and willing participant."

"You've denied me my freedom."

"You came to me willingly."

The reminder of Asajj's betrayal and her own naiveté was still raw enough to sting, especially after the way the Force adept had assisted in her ill-fated escape attempt. "And I chose to leave — but *you* wouldn't have it. I refuse to be a compliant hostage, bowing to your will!"

"I consider myself well warned," he returned, his expression turning smug. "If your next escape attempt is like the last, I should have no trouble collecting you."

His smugness is what did it. Her palm twitched in its eagerness to meet the side of his face, flashing up to do just that and wipe the smirk from his lips.

Vader's fingers closed about her wrist painfully tight and grinding the bones together, catching it just shy of his cheek. So close that she could feel the heat of his skin on her finger tips and there was no way she could fail to notice the way his nostril's flared and his eyes

burned with suppressed rage and, surprisingly, *hurt*. His chest brushed hers as he crowded her, staring down into her face. His words were soft, but all the more powerful for them as his blue eyes shone with deliberate intensity.

“I’ve been lenient with your temper, Padmé and I trust I’ve been understanding thus far with your thirst for violence against my person; perhaps even felt you entitled as I had *earned* the lash you wielded for penance; no more. Do *not* strike me again.”

They stared at each other for a long moment, neither questioning as to what he alluded, and Padmé tossed her head, shame swelling in the pit of her stomach to war with pride as she refused to look away.

She, better than anyone, knew of the physical and mental scars his childhood had wrought.

Striking him, as his masters had when he’d been a slave, was something she’d never seen him countenance from anyone and something she’d sworn to never do. It was nothing short of a miracle, she now realized, that he’d allowed her that satisfaction once, let alone more, and not lost his determined pursuit of her. That he’d reached the end of his tolerance for it, that he’d had any to begin with, was nothing short of astonishing.

And only, to her dismay as she stared up into his face, reinforced the fact he’d once been Anakin. There was no Vader in him at that moment; and the guilt wrapped itself about her heart in a painful squeeze. Coupled with her reaction to his smile yesterday, it was almost overwhelming.

The sound of the door opening behind them didn’t lift his gaze from hers. “Commander,” his tone was clipped, instructional, making it clear it was *he* who had summoned the guard.

“Yes, my Lord?”

“My wife has finished her outing for the day; she will be returning to our quarters — now.”

Padmé flinched.

While he’d phrased it less bluntly, it was clearly still an order, a reminder of whom was truly the master in this situation. He released her with a hard look. The Commander waited as Padmé backed away, refusing to turn her back on Vader, her expression wary. There was nothing of Anakin in him now, despite the reminder of his origins; for all she’d glimpsed, they might not have occurred at all.

Padmé waited until she reached the doorway before she tilted her head proudly, turned on her heel and marched away. She didn’t look back. Under guard with Vader’s strict order still ringing in her ears, she was escorted back to their suite.

Of Vader, she saw nothing for the rest of the night.

Month Twenty Four, Day 19 PEF

My apologies to all my readers — I got caught up in getting ready for my holidays I didn't realize I hadn't updated this... I honestly thought I had!

See you all at the end of the month and thank you for all of the good wished; it should be a blast :D

Chapter 56

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Nineteen PEF

Seated in the kitchenette at the island counter, a cup of tea she'd made sitting before her practically untouched, her fingers gently grasping the handle of a spoon as it trailed through the liquid, Padmé found herself dwelling on what had happened in the rec room the day before.

Brooding about it really.

On what she'd seen and what she'd heard. On Vader's accusations, her own, and his insistence. On his actions, his implications and ultimately her dismissal from his presence. Having had plenty of time to reflect on that confrontation and others, Vader's words and expressions had stuck with her as many others hadn't.

Stirring the cooling liquid without really seeing it — she'd been intending to make breakfast but had gotten no further than heating water when what little appetite had reared its head, deserted her — she considered yet again what she'd so innocently walked in on the morning before. What she'd seen in his eyes, heard in his voice; what she'd seen in his body language and the memories it had evoked along with the blinding pain.

It would teach her caution, a skill she'd thought for certain already to be in her repertoire, yet had been markedly absent yesterday. And while he was certainly no coward, she was loathe to try and use the rec room again without first verifying it was empty. Her lips twisted. She didn't dare chance another glimpse of the unsettling Anakin-like behaviors Vader exhibited without thought.

Exhaling softly, she pushed the cup away with disinterest, thoughts of Vader naturally intertwined with Anakin; two men who shared identical physical qualities but little else. Or so she'd believed for so long. That belief had been shaken at its very foundation, the lines between her husband and the monster who'd killed him blurring more and more every day she spent in his presence, weakening her to his charms.

Or rather, the charms of the man who *had been* her husband.

There was no denying, even to herself, the attraction he held for her — the temptation. The package hadn't changed, simply the contents, and he was as fit and hale as ever; *physically* Anakin in every sense of the word. From his curly hair to his icy blues down to the mechanical hand that graced his left forearm and down to his very toes, he had Anakin's physique, Anakin's presence; Anakin's confident allure.

The self same allure that had landed her in her current predicament and only served to enmesh her further.

Anakin.

Her heart squeezed painfully in her chest, a constant ache that was now side by side with thoughts of their children. Anakin had been delighted with the idea of being a parent — until he'd seen a vision in which she died to make it happen. An outcome that, thankfully, hadn't occurred. Yet, in moments like these, Padmé wondered if she wouldn't have been better off dead.

There would have been no pain — only regret. Regret for leaving her children before she'd had the chance to hold them and see them grow; had the chance to tell them what a good man their father had been. What good she'd seen still existed — for she'd believe then, with all her heart upon the birth of her twins, that Anakin had still been somewhere inside Vader.

If she'd died, whatever the Alliance had done to 'safeguard' her children wouldn't have been from her, but from the man she'd once called husband.

But she hadn't died and they'd taken her babies anyway; stealing them away as she lay helpless to speak her wishes. Carting them off like the thieves they were in truth because they'd known — Bail and Mon had *known*— she wouldn't have countenanced being separated from them for any reason, let alone separated from one another.

Her heart squeezed painfully, as she considered the thought once more; were her children together? Growing up as brother and sister as they were meant to? Were they being cared for by able and loving people; people who would give them the time and attention they needed to develop into the kind of people she *knew* they could be?

The helplessness of her situation crowded in and she struggled not to let it swamp her once more.

No matter who raised her children, no matter how capable, Luke and Leia were *her* babies. They were *hers* and no one could possibly give them what she could. Unconditional love — and a link to the truth of who they were and where they came from. No one could give them a physical piece of their parent's history.

Rubbing her hands over her face to banish fatigue, Padmé dropped them back to the table before reaching into a pocket and extracting the two piece of japor that never left her person; a gift she'd carried since Anakin had bestowed it upon her as a child. A gift that, at the time, had meant more to her than any jewels of state for it had been given in honest friendship by a boy who'd had little but thought nothing of sharing.

A little boy who had long since vanished.

Pulling them out, she noted the contrast of the lightly polished surfaces against the blue veined paleness of her skin and set the pieces gently on the table. Her fingers lingered as she

used both hands. Tracing the design for good fortune, she pressed them back together, making the pendant once again whole but for the small twin holes that pierced the bottom of each piece.

Two pieces of a whole; torn apart but fitted so perfectly no matter the distance or flow of time. They fit together as beautifully now as they had when she'd originally broken it. The edges were slightly rounder, less jagged, but fit all the same. Two pieces, halves of a whole and ever so representative of her situation.

A daughter without her family.

A wife without her husband.

A mother without her children.

Parts of her she could only hope to reclaim. Yet, even if she did, there was no telling how those parts, so long gone from her, would fit once more. Fingering the break, Padmé couldn't help but remember what had led her to do it. Once, she'd never conceived of a fate that would have led her to destroy or maim such a cherished gift. Once, she'd been a naive, blind fool — until Vader had brought her to her senses.

Vader.

Anakin.

Halves of a whole, neither one truly complete and yet, neither one truly in control.

He was the reason she'd broken it.

Her coma had been long but her recovery had seemed longer. Everyone had treated her as if she were liable to break at any moment; they'd lied to her, kept her calm with platitudes and solicitous assistance, all designed to keep the truth from her until she could bear it.

Bear it; right.

Her lips twisted in a bitter parody of a smile. She'd discovered, completely by accident, Anakin's fate. Oh, she could remember well enough the choke that had put her in the coma, his glowing eyes having haunted her unconscious state even as her heart cried out for his presence. He'd promised to be there when the twins were delivered and he'd failed her. Failed her so completely that she'd been put to the tender mercies of those she'd once believed to be her friends only to be betrayed in a way that equaled his.

Mon and Bail had tried to keep Anakin's fate from her and would have except for Threepio.

Her expression turned melancholy, confusion and hurt flitting across it in waves.

Threepio had been her only true friend on that base and, but for Anakin, she'd never have had him at all. She was his mistress, his responsibility, and the golden droid had felt he had failed her; failed Anakin. It was during one of their discussions in which Threepio expressed a sense of failure for being unable to follow Anakin's last orders.

It was how Padmé learned that she was supposed to have been taken to Coruscant for care, except Obi-Wan had overruled the droid's protests and brought her to Mon and Bail. It was

also how she learned that Anakin, once the ‘Hero With No Fear’ and a shining beacon of hope, had grown hard and cold, punishing everyone and everything for his loss of her.

She’d been shown her funeral — a shock to say the least — and had imagined Anakin’s grief. A mirrored grief in her heart that had lasted only so long as the tales of his atrocities grew, each new one driving a small dagger into her soul. Unable to believe she’d been so very wrong about the man she loved, it had been Bail who’d driven home the final spikes.

Darth Vader as Anakin now styled himself, had been the one to place her in the very coma that had almost cost her life.

Darth Vader had been instrumental in the slaughter of the Jedi, *all* Jedi, and continued to hunt them down with unsurpassed ruthlessness.

Darth Vader had almost single handedly brought down the Republic in which she believed, casting the Galaxy into a state of civil war with an Emperor at the head of the new Empire that would and could act with impunity.

No matter that the *illusion* of democracy had been kept in keeping the Senate intact, the truth of the matter was that the true power now lay in the Emperor himself.

The man who had been her husband had ruthlessly and mercilessly crushed the life from her dreams just as he’d tried to do with her. Broken, defeated and feeling abandoned, Padmé had torn the japor in half, using a mallet, a flat edge and pure, raw strength.

Only seeing the halves had done something to her, twisted like a dull blade deep in her gut and made her realize she could go no further. She’d collected the pieces close to her heart and wept; a symbol of all she’d lost. Of her broken heart; broken promises and, most of all, broken dreams. Surrounded as she was every day by the Alliance and the continued deception to keep her children from her, she’d focused on the future, on her children, instead of the past.

And it hadn’t worked.

She’d needed no reminders, but afterwards, as she’d split from Mon and Bail, disillusioned by their deceptive and high handed tactics, she’d been unable to part with the broken token and had brought it with her. As her plans to search for her children has coalesced into reality, the meaning of the broken japor had morphed and shifted.

Her fingers traced the symbol for good fortune again, the familiar curves and grains comforting even in its broken state.

It was no longer a symbol of all she’d lost, but an homage to the man their father had been. With Vader’s assertion of power where Anakin Skywalker had once been, he’d ceased to be the man Padmé had married and become a complete stranger, totally immersed in darkness. He become dead to her; Anakin Skywalker just another victim to Vader’s evil.

“How did it break?”

Vader’s soft query caught her off guard, her hand clutching the damaged pieces and tucking them out of sight without conscious thought. The blue veins across the back of her hand stood out with startling contrast as her skin pulled taught, the focus of her attention.

“I’d like to know, Padmé; to understand.”

A small, soft black object landed on the table next to her hand; the pouch she'd carried the pendant in since its destruction. She'd thought she'd lost it for good.

"I went to a lot of trouble to make that for you and when I found it... that way... You said it was broken because of how broken your life had become; what happened to cause the damage?"

"You did," lifting her gaze, she was aware of the simmering anger that accompanied her quiet accusation. "*Vader* happened."

"I didn't break it."

"You might as well have," her spiteful words were surprisingly lacking in heat for him as she closed her eyes, remembering. 'While I was recovering from my coma, they tried to keep word of what was happening from me; they didn't tell me that they'd already taken my children away,' her voice shook with anguish, "and they wouldn't tell me why yo—" she cut herself off. "Why *Anakin* wouldn't come to me even though I repeatedly asked."

Asked.

Padmé's lips twisted; she'd *begged* for her husband, for his presence. She'd needed his support with the absence of the twins and, until she'd been told the truth about it all, had failed to exhibit much pride in those first few weeks. She'd needed him, and he'd not come. It had been almost crippling.

"I didn't know you were alive."

"I know that now." Exhaling, blue met brown again as she opened her eyes to look at him once more, deliberately keeping her voice devoid of emotion — or trying to. "Threepio eventually told me where... Anakin..." she paused, making a decision; Anakin had been dead by then — there as no point in calling him anything but what he was. "Where *you* were and why you couldn't come, letting it slip that I needed to get better in part to help stop the carnage you were wreaking across the galaxy. I didn't believe him — more the fool I."

Vader, surprisingly, stayed where he was, watching her. "I thought you were dead, Padmé; there was this... great open hole inside me that nothing could fill; *nothing*."

"So you what, decided to make everyone else pay for it?"

"Shouldn't they have?"

"No one deserved to suffer simply because you were in pain; don't you see? That's why I broke it!"

He studied her for a long minute, the words having fallen between them like a blaster shot into a sudden silence. His brows drew together and he frowned. "*You* broke it."

"Yes; *I* broke it," she snapped back, hurt and anger flashing in her brown eyes as the pieces of the snippet dug into her palm. "I broke it because it represented every promise my husband ever made to me — and broke."

His own eyes flashed. "I never—"

“You destroyed everything I’d tried so hard to save,” she cut him off, stuffing the small bag where the snippet would eventually reside once more into her pocket. “*You* are the reason they won’t tell me where my children are — because they have to be kept safe from you; because they can’t and don’t trust me to do so. I’d have my babies with me right now if you hadn’t—”

“If I hadn’t what?” His tone was lethally soft. “If I hadn’t turned to the darkside? If I hadn’t sided with the Emperor in a bid to save your life because I *knew* life without you wasn’t something I could bear? I may have been a child when I made you that pendant, Padmé, but you know as well as I do it has meant far more.”

“It represented a dream; with that dream gone, why not break it? At least then I had some tangible proof — something I could feel and see — to represent my folly.”

“Loving someone is never a folly.”

“Loving someone like *you* is!”

The accusation hung between them for a moment before Vader straightened, regarding her with an unreadable expression before his lips twisted. “Keep telling yourself that, Padmé. For all you broke it, whatever the reason, I know you can’t hate me; you’d never have come to me otherwise.”

“Maybe I was just scratching an itch.”

“Perhaps.” He smiled for all the darkness in his expression. “Except I know for a fact that it’s more than that; you’ve said it yourself—”

And in the echo of those words was the boy he’d been, the *man* she’d struggled to resist — and whatever he added to the last of the sentence was lost to her under a tidal wave of emotions and remembrance she couldn’t fight. The image of the man he’d been overlaid his visage, warring with the man he’d become. The two merged, the seams frayed where they’d once before been two separate entities.

Vader was gone before she recovered, the almost tangible feel of his anger still hanging in the air where he’d been.

Stricken with memory, she could only sit where she was and stare at where he’d been, her heart bleeding from the re-opening of the old wounds. Anakin’s words on Vader’s lips; Anakin’s half-smile tilting his mouth. She placed her head in her hands, using the table for support. If he knew it or not, he couldn’t have picked a better way to reinforce what he was trying to do.

The more time she spent with him, the more of Anakin’s traits she saw and the more she was disinclined to resist. But resist she did, for no matter how much her heart longed for who he’d been, and who he sometimes appeared to be, her head knew he was still Vader no matter what he chose to do or say.

She *had* to resist.

Some time later, Padmé tensed as she heard the door open again, and lifted her head to wait in silence only to exhale a shaky breath when Vader didn’t appear and Artoo did.

Swallowing her bitterness at the droid's loyalty to the man, she managed to find a smile when he stopped in the doorway.

"Hello Artoo."

He queried her softly, his whole posture looking uncertain to her eyes. Guessing at his question, she shook her head. "I'm not mad at you; not anymore. I realize I shouldn't have asked you to pick sides; that wasn't fair."

The little astromech made a relieved noise and trundled into the kitchenette. He stopped by her leg, his optical sensor 'regarding' her critically before he voiced a more complex question. Padmé's gaze dropped to the translation box.

Are you sure? I brought you back because I believe you are in more danger without his protection than with; can you blame me for wanting to see you safe?

"I don't blame you, Artoo. I blame *him*."

Staying silent for a long moment, Artoo let out a noise that almost sounded like a huffing sound she'd once heard a beast on Tatooine make. *He is different since you came; can you not give him a chance to be what he once was?*

Laughing without mirth, Padmé slid off the stool and wrapped her arms about the little droid. "I wish I could, but he doesn't *want* to be Anakin anymore; all he wants to be is Vader. And Vader destroyed everything I worked so hard to build. Anakin might be somewhere inside him but there isn't enough of him left to... to..." Padmé's throat closed. *To love.* she finished silently.

Artoo's mournful tone matched the weight in her heart completely.

If only Vader could be Anakin; if only he *could* turn from the path he'd chosen. Then and only then did she think she might be capable of loving him again. As it stood she wanted him, *craved* him, but she didn't love him anymore than she hated him — and it ate at her. She would simply have to find a way to make sure it didn't happen again.

Unfortunately, a little voice in the back of her mind refused to stay silent as she hugged the droid. Sooner or later, it said, she was going to succumb to Vader's advances again and Vader, being Vader, would take advantage. Just how long did she think she could last?

The answer was more elusive than it would have been three weeks ago and should have been now. It was not a comforting thought.

Month Twenty Four, Day 20 PEF

Author's Note: Well, thanks for your patience guys; I'm back from my holidays and it was an absolute *blast*! Yellowstone was not what I expected and yet it was everything I expected. Anyone heading that way *needs* to do the Beartooth highway outside of Cook City leaving Yellowstone into Wyoming... the views are indescribable... I can't wait to go back!

So, the update as promised :)

And yes, there are breaks in the animosity between these two but they're temporary as most things...

Chapter 57

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Twenty PEF

Vader, once again, failed to return to their suite that night and for that Padmé was glad. Be it because she'd hurt his feelings or because he'd simply decided to give her space or, more likely, that he'd been attending to some *pressing* shipboard matter, it didn't matter.

She appreciated the distance.

And she despised it.

It left her alone to mull over events she wished she could forget and emotions she hadn't the strength to examine. The night was long, longer because she careened from missing her children, which inevitably led back to the man who'd been their father and just how they'd come to be in the first place. The thought pattern was circular, consuming, and as exhausting as ever.

She'd been in Vader's custody for three weeks as of that morning; three weeks. Agonizing days spent in a violent series of conversations and emotional upheavals continually draining her strength and reserves. Confrontations and encounters that sapped her strength to resist his allure and drained her will to fight him.

Part of her had even entertained a traitorous thought; would it be so bad to lean on him... to allow him to comfort her? Would it be so wrong to take his strength and use it to her advantage; to become strong once more?

The temptation to give in and do just that became more and more difficult to resist daily; in fact, it became more apparent with each passing day that she hadn't the will to resist him. Not anymore. Not after sharing his bed, no matter how much she protested otherwise, and certainly not after the kindnesses he *had* shown her, contrived or not.

It had been a painful realization

It made her question the strength of her convictions, the strength of her resolve. For if she couldn't resist Vader, how could she hope to protect her children when she found them?

Shaking herself free of the depressing thoughts sometime around 0600, she turned resolutely from the viewport and towards the door. With Vader occupied elsewhere, the training salle would likely be free at this hour. After the last aborted attempt to use it, she felt more than ever the need to expend some of that frustrated energy; hopefully she'd have the opportunity to unobserved.

It was, she knew as she keyed the door open to call for her escort, likely too much to ask.

Vader rounded the corridor to his quarters and paused, noting the absence of Padmé's security detail, and frowned. He was tired, exhausted after a long night on the bridge dealing with idiots who couldn't seem to find their underpants without his help. He'd been hoping for a brief meal and a nap — preferably with her in his arms — before needing to return.

Instead, he pulled out his comlink and flipped the frequency. "General."

"Yes, Lord Vader?"

"I'll be unavailable for some time; contact me only for Emergencies."

"Yes, Lord Vader."

Clicking the transmission off, Vader changed the frequency and activated it again. "Commander; what is your location?"

The head of Padmé's security detail answered almost immediately. "*The recreation room, sir. The Lady Vader has been inside for... some time.*"

Frowning at the comlink, Vader noted the hesitation. "Is there a..." he stopped. "I'll be right there, Commander."

Turning on his heel, he made his way unerringly through the corridors to the room where Padmé had caught him at his katas the morning before. It was a luxury he usually partook only in his quarters, but with his wife present, he'd been having trouble finding the balance necessary to get their full benefit. Having her catch him, however, had yielded more answers to questions he'd asked than before. In retrospect, it seemed that the more she recognized him as Anakin, the easier he was to talk to.

Nodding to the Commander, Vader strode straight into the recreation room and, after barely a half dozen steps, paused.

The sound of flesh solidly hitting padding could be heard ahead, a quick succession of rapid strikes that were accompanied by a low growl of sounds he couldn't identify. Moving to the corner where Padmé had watched him the day before, he stopped.

And stared.

Dressed in shorts, a tank top, barefoot with her hair coiled practically around her head, Padmé attacked a training droid with power, precision and passion. She turned to deliver a

brilliant side kick, nearly knocking the droid over in the process, and followed it up with a series of quick punches.

Sweat glistened on her alabaster skin — quite clearly a body that hadn't seen the sun for some time — but it was with some alarm that Vader realized that the shirt which would have once hugged her figure perfectly, hung down, flapping with her movements. It gave him enough of a view underneath he found he was able to count her ribs. Despite the strength and power of her presence and movements, he was clearly able to see her physical body was wasting away.

Her voice, the low murmur he'd been hearing, drifted to him and, with a start, he realized she was accompanying her workout with a monologue — a monologue, he realized after listening carefully, about *him*.

“— enough you're keeping me here, now you have to confuse the issue.” Her punches struck solidly against the torso of the droid. “You couldn't just be Vader. You couldn't just *be* the nightmare I've been living,” she spun in a circle, her foot connecting with the head of the droid. “You had to make it worse, to *be*!”

Idly he wondered what little tidbits he'd missed if she'd been talking to herself the whole time she'd been working on the droid. And it must have been for quite a while as one of the droid's arms hung uselessly at its side.

Her voice rose from its murmur.

“Those damnable eyes of yours!” her kick struck again at the head of the droid, snapping back to connect with her heel. “You look so much like him I want to scream!” A wordless yell accompanied the statement as she burst into a series of lightning fast punches.

Watching her, Vader eased back into the shadows, knowing she wouldn't appreciate the audience, but also sensing she was too caught up in the pain and misery that bled from her into the Force to notice him. Yet he stayed, watching and listening as she swore at him, cursed and damned him, all the while pummeling the droid with a merciless intent.

Somewhere in the middle of it, as she cursed him for seducing her, for turning her body against her, the tears started to flow. She spoke of need and desire, making him want to step forward to assure her she wasn't the only one so affected, only to stay his hand and remain where he was when moments later she burst out with a series of hard blows that finally took the droid from its feet, damning him loudly for turning her very self against her and making her doubt her convictions.

For making her weak; for making her *need* him.

Taking that as his cue, Vader slipped silently from the room and back out into the hallway. Stopping, he looked at the Commander.

“I believe you said she's been at this awhile, Commander.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I wasn't here.”

“Of course not sir; you've far too many obligations.”

With a jerk of his head, Vader headed back towards his quarters, too exhausted to consider all he'd learned just yet, and exhilarated all the same because of what he'd overheard. Padmé couldn't hate him. Oh, he'd known that, but to need the kind of tension release she'd sought in the form of beating the droid to a pile of circuits and wires boded well for him.

She was tense, repressed and poised on the edge of a knife blade, so to speak. She could go either way or destroy herself along the edge; an edge she was coming closer and closer to every day.

Frowning, Vader let himself into their suite and headed for his bedchamber. When he woke he would have to speak with Padmé about that. Now that he had her, he wasn't about to let her waste away into nothingness because of simple grief and stress.

No; she would live, be healthy again, and eventually they'd be a family once more.

If all he had to do was find the twins to make it happen, then that's what he would do. Failing that, he'd simply have to make her see that she was no longer in this fight alone and — want it or not — he was in her corner. Just like he had always been.

Padmé finished her workout barely an hour after Vader's silent departure, the adrenaline and deep ache of muscles long unused and thoroughly abused — but in a good way — giving her a sense of satisfaction that had been missing for a long time.

That part of it was derived from having vented a good portion of her frustrations, of giving voice to what she was feeling and thinking without an audience, was liberating. Almost as much as if she'd been free to do whatever she wished; as if she'd been there by choice.

Taking the time to run a couple of laps to cool down and then stretch, fatigue was already making itself known by the time she collected her guard to return to Vader's suite. And while she had no desire to return to her gilded prison, she didn't know of a shower in any other location available to her.

"Feeling better, my Lady?"

"Much, Commander," she assured him, striking out at her normal pace despite her fatigue. "I think that's just what I needed."

The clones formed up around her, falling into step as they rounded the first corner. As she turned, a dizzy spell struck, making her falter as the corridor seemed to darken and shift momentarily in front of her eyes. A hand at her elbow steadied her; the Commander — after her escape attempt — now tended to walk beside her instead of in front.

"My Lady?"

Shaking her head, she struggled to clear it. "I'm fine," she assured him, tugging her elbow free and resuming her walk.

She'd gone barely a dozen paces and was nearing the next corner when, upon crossing a hallway access point, the sound of crying stopped her dead. A baby's cry; like she'd heard in Vader's apartment. Only this was closer, but less focused, resounding through her like a blaster bolt.

Luke? Leia?

The hallway spun again as she turned her head, straining to catch another hint of the cry.

“Did you hear that, Commander?”

“Hear what, my Lady?” His helmet was twisted in the direction she was looking. “There’d be no sound from that hallway; it’s a deserted area.”

“Oh.” Padmé cast another long look at it before shaking her head, lifting one hand to it as things whirled about her yet again, a sick, queasy feeling inside telling her she needed to sit, to rest. She needed to get back to the suite; now. Before she embarrassed herself in front of the clones. “Never mind then.”

“My Lady?”

“I’m fine, Commander,” she snapped, not intending to be so forceful, but feeling as if she hadn’t the mental control to amend her tone. “Just keep walking.”

Her orders were enough as she set out again to quell his protectively outstretched arm.

Ignoring it, Padmé increased her pace despite the fact the halls seemed to be less defined than before and she had a sense of watching herself walking from beyond her body; as if she wasn’t in control. They made it back to the suite, her mind still foggy and struggling with the sound of the baby’s cry even as it coped with the dizziness.

As she turned to thank the Commander, she opened her mouth to speak only to watch him fade from a distance as darkness engulfed her.

Vader woke to the buzzing of his comlink, his own personal frequency, and snagged it off the table.

“If someone isn’t dying, they soon will be,” he snapped, throwing his other arm across his eyes. He’d caught sight of the chrono; he hadn’t been in bed for more than a half hour.

“*It’s the Lady Vader, my lord,*” the Commander of her detail informed him without preamble. “*She’s—*”

“Where?” Even as he snapped the words, Vader catapulted out of bed. With his free hand, he snagged the pants he’d so recently removed and started to tug them back on.

“*Near the entrance to your quart—*”

Vader didn’t wait to hear more as he tugged the pants up, fastening them even as he darted from the room and into the lounge. From his vantage point, he could see the Commander was kneeling and had Padmé in his arms.

Padmé was a dead weight. Her arms hung limp, her head lolling back, her hair brushing the carpeted floor. She’d obviously been caught just moments before, the clone having reacted quick enough to prevent her striking the ground, and not yet had the chance to adjust his hold.

Vader didn’t give him that chance.

Fear spurred him on upon seeing her so limp, his hand darting out as he called on the Force subconsciously, pulling Padmé from the grasp of the Clone and lifting her in the air. The Commander held on initially, but must have seen him approaching, for it was barely a moment's resistance before she floated free and towards him. Vader met her half way, catching her in his arms, his ungloved hands tight on her flesh as he held her close, his right hand sliding — flesh against flesh — along the side of her face.

“Padmé.”

Cradling her against his naked chest with his mechanical arm, he searched for a pulse and her vital signs. Her breathing was shallow, erratic, her heart beat racing under his fingertips, and Vader's eyes flashed almost orange when they darted to the Commander. “Summon the medical droid; now!”

Not waiting to see if his orders would be followed — what was the point? — he spun on his heel and backtracked to the lounge. His bare feet dug into the carpet as he strode around the sofa and settled Padmé into the nest of blanket and pillows she'd created. She didn't stir, didn't so much as flinch, when he stroked her hair from her face, brushing his thumb across her lips.

They looked abnormally bright in the pallor of her face.

Sitting next to her, he wrapped one of her hands in his own, the other cradling her head as his thumb feathered over the pulse point at her neck. Unconscious as she was, her usual vitality had fled and left behind was a shell of a woman whose weight was alarmingly slight.

“The droid is on its way, my Lord.”

Even as the Commander passed along the information, a small medical droid floated into the room, likely sent from a nearby station. It immediately headed for Vader, who sat back, but didn't release his hold on Padmé entirely. The scan's results came back almost immediately; malnourishment, exhaustion and over exertion. Her blood sugars were dangerously low, her body feeding on what little fat it had left, and her muscle mass, to sustain itself.

Vader's lips twisted; none of it was as surprising as it should be and, if he was honest with himself, he had *expected* those results. He pressed a button on the side of the droid to run a deeper scan.

“My apologies, my Lord, I should have been paying closer attention.”

The Commander had stopped by the wall that identified the lounge as a separate room, his voice subdued, and Vader was only peripherally aware that the clone had removed his helmet. Much as he wanted to blame the clone, Vader knew it lay with the woman on the sofa and so ignored, surprisingly, the admission of guilt. Without looking the Commander's way, Vader voice the question that ricocheted around in his head as the droid scanned Padmé a second time.

“What happened, Commander?”

The man straightened fractionally at the deceptively mild query. “She finished her workout, sir, and returned to the suite. On her way here, she asked if I'd heard something.”

Unseen to the clone, Vader's lips tightened — he had a good idea what she might have thought she'd heard — but didn't interrupt even as he ran the backs of his fingers over one of her cheeks.

"When I told her no, we continued."

"Has she done this before on your walks?"

"No, sir."

The droid beeped and Vader checked out the results; preliminary tissue damage on top of the rest. His wife was wasting away, suffocating under stress. He could force her to eat but getting her to sleep was unlikely as long as her nightmares continued to haunt her; as long as their children remained missing.

Somehow, somehow, he had to find them quickly — and not just for their sakes.

The droid beeped, a compartment opening, and a syringe appeared. A booster shot; something the droid suggested to help stabilized her already flagging physical properties and promote healing. Knowing he needed to do something, Vader accepted the syringe, his expression tightening, wishing it weren't the necessity the scans showed it was. She wasn't at the point of a nutrient drip yet, but she was dangerously close.

The injection was silent and painless; a contact point at the artery in her neck taking the vitamins and drugs straight to her system. Almost immediately, as Vader replaced the syringe in the droid's grasping arm, there was more color in her cheeks.

"My Lord?"

"Yes, Commander?"

"She appeared disoriented and disappointed by the event, but refused to accept my assistance. Upon our arrival here, she turned around and promptly fainted; as you see her now."

As if his words were a trigger, Padmé stirred, her brow furrowing as she shied away from Vader's touch.

"I," she licked her lips, her eyes opening, and Vader was struck anew by the exhaustion that shone in their depths with her hoarse insistence; exhaustion she seemed fully aware of but unable to control, "do not *faint*, Commander."

"Of course not, my Lady," he agreed immediately, putting his helmet back on.

Vader shot the man a look and, with a smart salute, the Commander turned on his heel. "My Lord; my Lady."

There was a strained silence as Vader slid his hand back to its resting place along her neck, his thumb tracing her jaw line. Her brown orbs slid shut again as she turned her face away from his touch.

"Let me go."

For all he knew she was trying to be tough, the plea that left her lips lacked any kind of heat or conviction and he ignored it. He ignored the way she flinched, though each time she

did his expression pinched in irritation, his concern for her well being overriding it — but only just. He despised the thought that Padmé didn't want his touch, no matter how she'd responded to it before.

"Please," she finally whispered, looking up at him through her lashes as if it was too difficult a task to lift her eyelids completely.

"I can't," he told her honestly, waving the droid away; it silently followed the Commander. "You need me."

Her eyes opened completely once more and he couldn't have missed the incredulous expression within if he'd tried. Still, he forged ahead when she said nothing, seeming at a loss on how to answer his statement. It hadn't been made arrogantly, at least not intentionally; it was more, he felt, a statement of fact.

"Would you like to know the result of the droid's scans?"

"I don't particularly care."

"You should; your health has deteriorated to a crucial point — you're wasting away to nothing. Your dizzy spells—"

"I don't *have* dizzy spells."

His lips compressed in a thin line, and, with difficulty, he held onto his temper. "Fighting for the sake of fighting isn't getting us anywhere; you need to eat."

"I'll eat when I'm hungry," she snapped back, irritated at being told what to do as she pushed herself to a sitting position. She was uncomfortably aware of the fact he wore nothing but his pants. All that flesh was making her dizzy — or maybe it was an after effect of her so-called fainting spell.

"And sleep when you're tired?" his eyes glinted dangerously.

"You're not my keeper."

"Someone needs to be."

"Then it won't be you!" Pulling her legs up, she pushed at his hip, but Vader was immovable, his hand having left her collar bone to clench on the back of the couch. Effectively, and annoyingly, she was pinned in place. "Let me up."

"So you can go where — to the viewport?" his tone was derisive. "You need to sleep, Padmé; you shouldn't be anywhere but in bed."

"I can't sleep," she snapped at him, pushing at his arm with no success. "I can't..."

Vader's grip eased, but he didn't relent. "Yes, you can. You're stronger than this, a fighter, you always have been; don't let this destroy you."

Her glare returned immediately but it was laced with a slightly wild look. "My babies have been *stolen* and you want me to... to..." she laughed abruptly, the sound slightly hysterical.

"Stop." Vader grasped her by the shoulders and shook her once, attempting to stop her laughter. "Stop it! This isn't funny, Padmé." Her laughter ceased on the second shake. "You

could die if you continue on like this.”

“I should have died when you put me in that coma; I should never have awoken from it!”

“Don’t you *ever* say that again,” his eyes flashed dangerously. “I need you; our *children* need you. Under no circumstances are you better off dead!”

The mention of Luke and Leia sobered her abruptly, bringing on a lightning quick change of mood and her expression shifted. “My babies...”

“Our babies,” he told her softly, running his hands up and down her arms now that she was no longer fighting him. “They need you. If you continue on like this...”

“What does it matter how I continue on?” Her expression was bleak. “You’ve taken my freedom, my resources and my every chance at finding them. Max would ha—”

“Don’t,” he snapped, “*ever* say that name to me again.”

“Why not?” her defiance returned, sparking her eyes with more than just determination. “Heat least never tried to curtail my freedom or control me!”

“You were never his to control.”

“Unlike Asajj, who has always been *yours* to control since she became your apprentice?” Her words were deliberately inflammatory; she wanted him to storm off.

Vader leaned in close, pushing her back into the pillows against the arm rest as she sought to avoid closer physical contact. “You are *my* wife,” he told her softly, dangerously. “No man touches you but *me*.”

“Get away from me!”

Lifting one hand, he deliberately placed his finger tip against the tip of her cheekbone and drew it downwards, making her flinch even as he heard the soft gasp she struggled to hide. “You don’t really want me away from you,” he returned in that same, soft voice — except now it held a purr of satisfaction. “And since it’s my duty as well as my pleasure to ensure you’re taken care of, I—”

“The hell with your duty!” Cutting him off, Padmé placed both palms against his bare chest and heaved, pushing him back to his original starting position but no further. “I don’t need you babysitting me. I’m an adult. I can take care of myself; I have been for years!”

“If you were able to take care of yourself,” at the end of his patience with her, he glared right back, “you wouldn’t be lying flat on your back after fainting from hunger and lack of sleep!”

“I said don’t need a keeper! Let me go and I’ll prove it to you.”

A headache started pounding at Vader’s temples with the run around; this was getting them nowhere.

“You’re not going anywhere Padmé.” Pushing to his feet — his bare feet — he stared down at her, his lips a thing white line. “I meant it when I said I’d hook you up to a nutrient drip if it means keeping you healthy. Force help you if it comes to *that*!”

Surging to her feet as he began to walk away, Padmé clutched the sofa for support as the room spun crazily. Unwilling to admit, he had a point, she yelled at his retreating back. “Force help *you* if you think you can keep me here!”

Vader turned in the door to his sleeping chamber, their gazes locking, and then he smiled. A cold, supreme smile that was all Vader. “It does.”

The door closed, blocking him from her view, and Padmé let out a growl of pure frustration. “Can’t take care of myself,” she muttered darkly as the room finally stopped spinning. “I’ll show you, you arrogant... egotistical... domineering...”

Striding away, she entered the kitchenette and looked around, hands on her hips as her stomach growled.

Loudly.

Casting a glare back at the door where Vader lay trying to sleep, she quickly turned her attention to the cooler and what it had to offer. She was hungry for the first time in days, and if Vader thought she was eating to please him, she wasn’t about to *not* eat simply because he wanted her to. No; she’d eat because she needed to. Because her stomach was growling and maybe, just maybe, be able to throw it in his face.

He might have told her to eat, but she’d been able to see he truly hadn’t expected her to obey when he’d had such little success in the past.

To spite him, she told herself as she surveyed the contents of the cooler. It was easier to admit than the truth.

Month Twenty Four, Day 21 PEF, morning

I thought I posted this yesterday... guess not...

Thanks for reading everyone!

Chapter 58

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Twenty One PEF

Morning

Padmé woke with a start, the sound of Luke and Leia's cries ringing in her ears, the tears in her eyes making the room spin in an indistinct blur. Letting out a single sob before she bit her lip, she clutched the pillow she'd been using.

She could still see their short little arms reaching her way as she was caught, stuck in a mire, their finger tips a hair breadth away... until Mon and Bail arrived. Leaving her to founder, they scooped up Luke and Leia, despite her desperate cries, ignoring her struggles, and disappeared into the darkness.

But not before sending her a smile, and telling her that it was for the best; that it was *better* this way.

It was double damning; the worst sort of betrayal, and Padmé found she couldn't stop shaking. The nightmare echoed within the room, as if tainted by it, the darkness as much her enemy as Bail and Mon had chosen to be.

Pushing herself up from the sofa, Padmé stumbled over the low table, stubbing her toe on one leg, but not feeling the pain. She didn't go down, catching herself on the sofa even as she tasted blood. It was a fact she barely noted as her teeth cut deep into her lip.

Luke...

She blinked, seeing Bail scooping her little boy from the side of the mire, a congenial smile on his face — only to turn and leave her.

Leia...

Tears streaked down her cheeks, escaping as she blinked again, seeing Mon echo Bail's actions, deliberately ignoring Leia's reaching hands as her daughter stretched towards Padmé, struggling to reach her mother. Only to have her desires dismissed as Mon carried her into the darkness.

Stumbling blindly, she reached one wall, not really seeing where she was going, pushing off as she tried to escape the images, the twisting of the knife in her gut, and came up hard

against another wall, a flashing light before her eyes catching and holding her attention. Focusing on it, she remembered a sense of peaceful discontent.

And the harsh reality of her situation came crashing back down on her; where she was and who she was with.

Vader.

He lay sleeping behind that door, the flashing light indicating it wasn't locked, just closed. Vader; Anakin. Two halves of a whole she couldn't bear to need, didn't *want* to need, but couldn't resist at that moment of weakness. Pressing trembling fingers to the activation panel, the door whisked open silently, and Padmé looked into the darkened room with trepidation.

But Vader didn't stir.

He lay on his back, one arm stretched wide, as if searching for her, the other across his eyes as if to block out the world and its surrounding trappings. Anakin had never slept that way as far as she knew, and the pose gave her pause. Unable to shake the nightmare, the images practically seared into her brain, Padmé still hesitated on the threshold of what she was contemplating. Stepping into Vader's room, going to him willingly... no matter the turmoil she felt, she knew it wouldn't help the way she needed.

Instead, she turned from the bed, stepping into the room, and — keeping one eye on Vader — took several steps to the foot. His bare feet peaked out of the sheet that lay across his lower half and she forced herself to ignore them, instead focusing on the glowing numbers of his bed side chrono which told her it was not long after midnight.

Less than an hour since she'd attempted to get some sleep.

Settling on the floor at the foot of the bed, she tilted her head back against the base board as tears continued to streak her cheeks. Sitting there, she took a deep breath, unintentionally inhaling the scents she's always associated with Anakin — and ignoring the fact that they were now tied to Vader as well. No matter his reality, she needed the mirage enough to terrify her; but not enough to make her leave.

The darkness surrounded her in a cocoon of silence, Vader's deep and even breathing soothing in ways few things were to her anymore. Concentrating on it, she allowed the sound to lull her, comfort her, and, even as it did, her exhaustion and desolation crept in and her eyes drifted shut.

They snapped open what felt like eons later, darting about the darkened room as Padmé struggled to identify where she was and why, a crick in her neck and legs that tingled from lack of blood flow telling her she'd been in the same position too long. Checking her chrono, she blinked in surprise to find that three hours had passed.

Three hours of sleep that left her longing for more — a feeling she'd nearly forgotten — and indicative of just how well she'd been sleeping. Vader's breathing continued unabated above her, the sound as soothing in those moments as it had been when she'd initially drifted off.

Suppressing a sigh, she pushed to her feet, wiggling her toes to get her circulation back, and cast an eye on his sleeping form. He hadn't moved, except to roll towards his outstretched arm, the arm that had been flung over his eyes now clutching a pillow.

Quietly stepping from his room, she closed the door behind her with barely a sound, marveling at the fact Vader hadn't woken upon her intrusion. Anakin, she knew, had always been a light sleeper. But then, she ruefully admitted, neither of them had been sleeping well since he'd brought her here. Perhaps it was a testament to his own exhaustion.

Much as she hated to admit it, she'd slept better for the three hours she'd been on his floor, than she had in some time. No nightmares; the one that had driven her to his room having faded away into near nothingness. Somewhat rejuvenated, she was better able to cope with it, pushing the images away as they threatened to crowd closer and instead turned her attention to one of the games the troopers in her entourage had lent her.

Something, anything, to keep her mind off the nightmares and the unexpected peace she'd found at the foot of the bed of the man who was the reason for their continued absence.

"Good morning."

Padmé didn't look up from the puzzle she was working on, adding another layer even as Vader's greeting drew her attention. She didn't look at him, couldn't, when she was so acutely aware — even if he wasn't — that she'd come close to asking for his help that morning.

"Padmé."

"Did you sleep well?" Her inquiry didn't contain a greeting, but then it wasn't supposed to. It was nothing beyond a bland politeness — even if she didn't lift her head.

"You know," his tone was mild — and she let out an indignant sound when he used the Force to yank the game from her fingers. "It's customary to look at someone who is conversing with you."

"Give it back."

He tapped the datapad against the back of his left hand, looking at her with arched eyebrows as she turned to meet his gaze. "That's better."

"Give it back," rising to her feet, Padmé held out her hand. "I'm not done with that yet."

Curious at her insistence, Vader examined the contents before looking back her way; she'd lowered her hand. "Puzzles?"

"I need something to occupy my time."

"Aside from walking and working yourself into exhaustion?"

Her lips thinned, her eyes flashing, but she didn't rise to the bait. "Yes; aside from that."

"I've a better use for your time," saving her game, he pocketed the datapad as he closed it down. Her inhaled breath showed she'd followed his original train of thought — in having her in his bed — but there were more pressing matters of her health to consider after yesterday and he nodded towards the kitchenette. "Join me for breakfast."

It obviously wasn't the instruction she'd been expecting.

"What?"

"I said; join me for breakfast — food."

"I'm not hungry."

"Join me anyway," he ordered, turning from her. "I want your company."

Padmé followed but didn't enter the kitchenette, stopping instead in the doorway. "My game, if you please."

"It doesn't please," he returned. "What would please me is having my wife eat something before I have to have her restrained and medicated for her own good."

"I ate last night," she told him shortly.

"And you can eat again this morning," Vader pulled something from the cooler and set it on the board even as he reached for a knife. With his body in the way, Padmé couldn't see what he was making. "That's the wonderful thing about our bodies, my love; they require sustenance frequently. Far more frequently than you've been getting."

His patronizing words did nothing to turn her mood more charitably in his favor. "I'm not hungry."

"Sit," he ordered instead.

"I'm more than capable of making something for myself when I'm hungry," she snapped, not moving from the doorway. "Give me back my game."

"After you've had a bite to eat," Vader's tone gained an edge as he stopped to place whatever he was chopping onto a plate only to resume his preparation work almost immediately. "You can tolerate my company for a few minutes, surely."

Crossing her arms, Padmé arched her eyebrows. "I'd rather not have to tolerate you at all."

"Me either." He looked back over his shoulder, the knife pausing mid-chop, a roguish grin on his lips. "But since you can't bring yourself to *appreciate* me, I'll settle for this; for now."

"That's not what I meant and you know it. Give me back my game; I wasn't finished with it."

"You can finish it after breakfast when I go to the bridge." Finishing his prep work, Vader placed the knife aside and finished filling the plate. Turning, Padmé could see it was full of fruit and two forks; not his usual breakfast. He took two steps to the counter and placed it between the two chairs. "Eat."

"How many times are you going to harp on this subject? We had this discussion weeks ago."

"As long as it takes; you're no bigger than when you got here," his lips thinned as he regarded her critically. "Arguably, you're *thinner*; starving yourself won't help you find our children."

"If I was doing it deliberately," she returned curtly, deliberately steering clear of the mentions of the twins. After last night's nightmare, she couldn't yet speak of them with him. He'd see right through her — and she knew it. At the moment, it wasn't a risk she was willing to take. "I'd agree with you. I am simply *not* hungry."

“Then force yourself.”

“You know, usually it’s the wife who’s the nag in a relationship.”

“At least you finally admit we have one,” his eyes glittered, taking her caustic comment and turning it back on her. “Eat, Padmé.”

Eye blazing, they narrowed, but she didn’t reply and instead turned on her heel to head back to the lounge. But, even as she stepped away, her stomach growled; she’d recognized two of her favorites from home on that fruit plate — deliberately no doubt — and her body suddenly craved them. She wouldn’t, however, give Vader the pleasure of another victory that morning.

She’d eat when he was gone.

Vader watched her leave, taking a bite of the fruit with a frown.

Stubborn; she redefined the word.

Eating quickly, he wrapped the leftovers and replaced the remains in the cooler. Her game and datapad he placed on top, a hint she wouldn’t fail to understand, and then strode from the room. With the mop up on Toydaria, the enslavement of the population, the razing of what cities were left and the round up of all available resources, he had a lot to oversee and few trustworthy people to help.

Fortunately for him, Artoo had organized the priorities for him while he’d been busy yesterday and sent a copy to his office terminal on the bridge.

Pulling his comlink from his belt, he keyed it to the droid’s frequency. “Artoo.”

An immediate toodle of acknowledgement came across the line.

“Where are you?”

The answer was swift and drew a faint smile. *In the fighter bay.*

Working, no doubt, on the upgrades Padmé’s impromptu flight attempt had interrupted. “Wait there; I’ll be right down.”

Artoo made an affirmative sound, and Vader disconnected the link. He still stung from the lashing Artoo had given him, yet had been soothed by his show of loyalty in returning Padmé to his side. No doubt the little droid felt she was better off with him — much as he did. Padmé, he suspected, hadn’t appreciated Artoo’s interference but didn’t hold it against the droid.

No; for some reason, she was still fighting *him*.

Taking the turbo lifts down, he entered the service bays of the Star Destroyer where the extra fighters and various parts were kept. His own fighter, usually in the main hangar bay, had been removed to this level on his orders and now only he and Artoo had access to it. Hopefully she wasn’t desperate enough to try the same plot twice but he wasn’t about to chance Padmé getting free to take it again.

“Artoo?”

The droid called from a corner of the bay, and Vader turned in that direction. Moving around one of the shuttles in the area, he stopped, his eyes wide. His beloved ship's innards had been removed, the wires and couplings disconnected and the internal workings hung down like vines; his fighter was obviously out of service and would be for some time.

"Artoo, what have you *done*?"

The droid appeared, a series of complex whistles filling him in, and Vader's shoulders relaxed. Of course; he was replacing the older relays to allow for the newer specifications to be used at the optimal outputs. He breathed a silent sigh of relief even as he wished he had the time to pitch in.

An indignant sound came from the droid and Vader chuckled. "Sorry, I know. I should trust that you know what you're doing."

Artoo agreed bluntly with a rude noise.

"I've a favor to ask," Vader trailed his hand along the underside of his fighter, wishing he could take it out but knowing it was impossible. Leaving Padmé for any reason beyond a summons from Coruscant would be unwise. "It's about Padmé."

A mournful wail followed his statement and Vader couldn't help but chuckle.

"It's not a fate worse than death, relax!" An inquiry followed and Vader expounded, losing that touch of mirth. "She's not eating right. She passed out yesterday and I had one of the medical droids run some scans."

A question.

"The information's in my private medical database, but it's not good."

A quick squawk showed Artoo's concern.

"She's okay right now, but she won't be if she continues on like this." He sighed, shaking his head. "She won't listen to me, Artoo; I need you to talk to her — to make sure she's getting enough to eat."

With a beep, the little droid made his displeasure clear; he didn't want to make Padmé do anything else she didn't want to.

"It's for her own good," Vader snapped, irritated to be questioned. "If she doesn't eat, she'll waste away; I can't let that happen, Artoo. Losing her once almost killed me, if I lost her again..."

Reluctantly, Artoo acknowledged that statement. He'd been at Vader's side when news of Padmé's death had reached them; he'd seen firsthand the devastation such an announcement had wrought. With a slightly mournful, and reluctant tootle, he ceded to Vader's judgment.

"Thank you, old friend." Reaching out, he patted the domed head. "It's just when I can't be around; I'll manage her the rest of the time, but she *needs* to eat."

Artoo voiced a question that made Vader grimace.

"Yes; she needs to sleep too, but that's not something she'll let me help with."

Another question from the droid.

“She doesn’t trust me, Artoo,” much as it hurt to say it, Vader knew it for the truth. “She has these... nightmares about our children and, even though they’re devastating and I can *feel* how she lives this separation anew each time she wakes, she won’t let me help.”

Artoo made a soft, almost agonized sound. It matched his own feelings on the subject perfectly.

“She doesn’t sleep, she doesn’t eat; it’s a miracle it hasn’t killed her before now.”

There was a long silence before Artoo toodled his next question, the sound subdued.

“Force, I certainly hope it’s not deliberate.” Raking a hand through his hair, Vader squeezed and then release it, staring off into the distance. Could Padmé be deliberately trying to kill herself despite what she’d said? Shaking his head, his hand dropped. “No; she wants our children too much for that. She wouldn’t risk it. I won’t let that happen anyway; if need be, I’ll do as I promised and strap her to a nutrient drip.”

A chuffing sound drew out a half smile.

“You’d like to see me try, eh?”

Artoo toodled an affirmative with a quantifier as Vader patted his domed head again. “I hope it doesn’t come to that either. Check on her at noon daily, would you? It’s when I have the most trouble getting away.”

Agreeing to Vader’s request, Artoo turned back to the ship.

“Artoo?”

The dome swiveled in his direction.

“Any luck with that frequency Padmé gave you?”

A frustrated sound was his answer.

“An algorithm you can’t crack? Really?”

Another rude noise followed and Vader chuckled; it wasn’t often his friend was stumped by a code. And while Vader was no slicer, his interest was caught. “Keep trying, Artoo; if we can find him, I’d like to bring Threepio home.”

Artoo agreed and then trundled back towards the fighter. With a last, longing look, Vader forced himself to quit the space and head for the bridge. Pressing matters apparently waited his attention and, for once, he wished there was someone he could pass them off to. Unfortunately, as effective as the General was in combat, once it was over, he was practically useless.

Heading for the bridge, he turned his thoughts away from his fighter and the upgrades Artoo was working on. If he was lucky, they’d be done sooner rather than later. Some high speed maneuvering was just what he needed to absorb him completely; he couldn’t wait to take it out for a spin.

Month Twenty Four, Day 21 PEF, afternoon

Author's Note : My apologies for not having updated this past month, I got sucked into National Novel Writing Month and my total focus has been on getting my word count finished. I challenged myself to double the 50K word count necessary to win — and did it!

Another original novel complete *wipes brow* wow, tough work!

In addition, I published my first novel and its hit now and there have been some personal life issues that needed to be dealt with.

All in all, it's been a busy, very exhausting, month so my apologies for not updating anything, especially this story!

But, I'm back now, and we continue with the story!

Chapter 59

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Twenty One PEF

Afternoon

Shortly after the lunch hour, Vader returned to his suite to find the guard detail absent and his wife notably missing. The silence as he entered was stifling, almost oppressive, as if rebelling at the idea of being empty. Too similar to the agonizing silences of the last two years when he'd believed her dead. Even now, when all they seemed to do was fight, bicker or make love, anything was better than lapsing back into that all consuming stillness that had consumed his life.

Even her claims that she hated him; that she didn't want his touch.

Anything— so long as there was no silence.

A quick comm. call to the Commander in charge of her security detail assured him that she had not returned to the recreation room, but was instead doing laps around the deck — walking laps.

It was good to know she hadn't lost all sense; still, he wished she hadn't gone out. She needed time to recover from yesterday's collapse and he wasn't overly pleased to hear she wouldn't even consider a day of idleness. Of course, he considered her side of things, and knew no matter how much he wished it, she *couldn't* remain idle.

For when she was idle, the memories were the worst and, even now with her out on the deck, he could feel her fighting against the emotional abyss which enveloped her when she became too weak and let her guard down.

Shaking his head, he headed through the suite and, wishing she'd let him help but knowing she wouldn't, he was unbearably aware of how empty the suite felt without her presence. No

matter her mood, her absence was almost like a physical blow, not unlike the weight that had threatened to crush him upon learning of her death. Part of him wished she'd return immediately, and he was tempted to order just that, but he knew that giving her space was working in his favor and managed to restrain himself..

Besides, what answer would he give when she demanded to know why she'd been called back?

The truth?

That he wanted her in their suite to keep him company and get rid of the unnerving silence? Hardly. Not only would he open himself to ridicule, but it was far too revealing as to just how much he'd come to depend on her presence. Not to mention how much he missed her when she was absent.

It would give her power, something he knew better than to offer willingly; as a Sith Lord, he knew the value of power. Whomever wielded it, *controlled* it, held all the cards. To hand Padmé that kind of power over him would be foolish to the extreme.

Yes, he loved her; he had no problem admitting that.

But to admit that he missed her even now, to tell her that he wanted her with him always — in the sense of a physical presence beside him — would be too much. Too dangerous. Not to mention he'd lose all credibility if he started carting his wife everywhere; yesterday morning when she'd passed out and he'd come rushing to her side had been excusable. Expected even. The clones would not begrudge him that much. Most, if not all, were well aware of his search for her and had suffered when word of her death had reached him.

But a Sith Lord as a doting husband, setting her out there as a target for anyone even as he catered to his own needs?

He'd be a laughing stock.

Yes, he admitted selfishly, the thought had appeal, but it was a foolish pipe dream. Just like her democracy had been; just like the Jedi. Everyone, he'd learned the hard way, was out for themselves.

It was a lesson he'd learned well from his Master; that everyone wanted something from you even if they claimed otherwise. Padmé couldn't be revealed as his Lady outside of the few who already knew she was there without the chance of having the Emperor confirm his suspicions and Vader refused to allow that kind of danger.

Padmé was *his* — body, heart and soul; she always had been, always would be. That they didn't see eye to eye at the moment was frustrating, but her presence more than made up for it. Melancholic and erratic though it was, she was the same soothing presence she'd always been and being physically without her — even now — was like... like having his arm severed again.

A visceral, raw feeling of loss that had nothing to do with the length of time she'd been out and everything to do with the simple fact that she was.

Not even the promise of reunion, as he'd learned during the war, had dulled that sense — though it had never been as consuming as it was now. He put it down to her death and

unexpected resurrection. Why else would he feel so strongly about letting her out of his sight again?

Shaking off the thoughts, Vader was determined not to dwell on the hows and whys of it all and found he needed a distraction. Something to keep him occupied until her escort returned her to his side — a matter of uncertainty no longer. For they *would* return her if she wished it or not. This was his domain and Padmé would learn that; no matter her small shows of defiance, he was Master here.

Heading for his office with a purposeful step, he keyed in the access code and opened the door, sliding the override into place to keep the door that way; he wanted to see when Padmé returned and, if he knew her at all, she'd want to see what was inside his office.

Settling himself behind his terminal, he activated it with a flick of his wrist and keyed in another password. Looking for something occupy his time, he scrolled through the confidential files that had been accumulated on the various resistance groups and Jedi he was tracking. Settling, finally, on the small folder with the information on Padmé's.

Opening it, he settled back in his chair as he read through the accumulated data — which was surprisingly little. Padmé's organization might have been small, but the security leaks were practically nil. Staring at it, his fingers twitched and, almost of their own accord, typed the name "Max" into the search engine.

There would have been more, but he didn't know the slicer's last name.

It came up with two references, both of which had his eyes narrowing with displeasure as they mentioned very little beyond the facts he had defected from a larger group to become Padmé's primary 'go to' guy. Irritation had him checking the files further, for mention of anything else, but the man's skill was apparent in the total lack of information on Padmé's band.

Everything he had, which was mostly provided by word of mouth from Asajj, was from *before* her little terrorist group had been formed.

Name: Maxwell

Age: 28

Vader's lips twisted. That Padmé's precious *Max* was younger than she was didn't sit well; his wife apparently preferred younger men.

Occupation: Financial Analyst

Another term for 'slicer' he knew; and Asajj had confirmed that Max had been a driving force behind Padmé's ability to wreak so much havoc. Without him, she'd have not been quite so successful.

Unfortunately, nothing in the file was new to him and the only reason he'd had information on the man initially was because he'd suddenly, and completely, dropped from circulation. A rebel sympathizer? Possibly; except he'd defected to Padmé's little group and become a non-entity.

Until Padmé's role had been revealed.

Even now, the man meant nothing in the grand scheme of things... except for the fact he'd dared touch what was *his*. Vader's jaw clenched and he stabbed the button to change the screen. Until Asajj found and brought Max to him, there was nothing he could do about the Slicer. And while he didn't like it, Vader knew it was simply a matter of time.

Patience, as his Master taught, yielded its own rewards

Trying another route, Vader checked instead on the information he'd acquired on the Jedi, cross referencing it with the names of those who'd gone missing, before checking his security protocols on his personal files. He found little beyond a series of names that were suddenly not where they'd once been reported to be. They, like Max, had simply vanished.

More of Padmé's handiwork.

His wife had once been a very busy woman. Eighteen months of grief and she'd managed to thwart him more than any other group. It was, of course, because she knew him so well; even if she refused to admit it.

The thought buoyed his spirits even as he checked for mentions of the Alliance in the files; anything that would tie Padmé to the people so determined to undermine the Empire. Yet, even as he did so, he knew he wouldn't find anything. Padmé had refused to name the individuals who had stolen their children and, for the life of him, he couldn't understand why.

Yes, he'd immediately take them into custody and torture the information free, but he wasn't about to leave his children in anyone else's hands if he didn't have to. Why couldn't she see that all he wanted to do was help? Who cared if people who'd betrayed her died if it meant getting Luke and Leia back into her arms?

She believes you betrayed her, a little voice in the back of his mind reminded him suddenly. Irritably he quashed it, silencing it completely with an act of will. No matter what she believed he'd done to her, he would *never* keep his children from their mother.

Giving up on the Alliance search after only a half-hearted attempt — he'd had no further information on that front since engaging his search crews on other crucial missions — he turned instead to Asajj's latest report. Written, instead of holo, it had been sent in a coded burst

Received word of a lead; will return when I have him.

Nothing more.

Asajj, he knew, had been discharged from the medical lab and disappeared. He'd immediately sent her orders to resume tracking down Max. She'd acknowledged the order and the instruction that she wasn't to return until she had him in custody; he hadn't heard anything beyond this message since.

It would work in his favor, he knew, to have her away from the ship for some time. While she'd proved useful during the Toydarian attack, the constant need to remind her of her place was grating. He needed all his strength and focus to deal with Padmé; Asajj was an unwelcome intrusion, no matter how... *convenient* she'd been in the past. Unfortunately she hadn't yet outlived her usefulness to him, but fortunately her talents were better put to use in the field and she needn't be under foot.

The thoughts were as fleeting as the previous ones, and he called up the next series of reports his special investigations had prepared. The off the record search for his children wasn't something he was willing to bring to his own Master's attention just yet. If Palpatine knew Padmé had given him twins...

But no; his Master would never know because Vader wouldn't tell him.

Unfortunately, the information was more of the same — reports stating that they were tracking down leads, interviewing witnesses and so on. Nothing concrete; nothing he could show Padmé to ease her nightmares and give her hope. That he checked the reports several times a day for something, anything, to bring her to lift her spirits likely contributed to a lack of surprise at the news. Thus far, there had been very little progress.

A noise in the doorway drew his attention and he knew, without looking, Padmé had returned. His eyes still on his correspondence, he addressed her. "Did you enjoy your walk?"

There was a moment of hesitation before she replied, her voice not quite as close as he'd thought.

"What do you think?"

Looking up with a crooked grin, his smile didn't falter when he met a cool glare head on. It spurred his next comment, deliberately provoking her. "At least you didn't try and get away this time."

Her gaze turned from cool to icy, the hours away seeming to have replenished her reserve. "No thanks to your tightened security detail."

His grin turned patronizing; so she *had* noticed. He'd been wondering if she'd comment on it. Cocking his head at her, he noted she was standing several feet from the door, her gaze inspecting his surroundings even as she tried to make it appear that she wasn't. It amused him to see her attempting to gather information — no doubt a tactic she'd used before and with some degree of success.

"That's right — you've never seen what's behind the door here." He waved one hand at his office, knowing it was bare even by Imperial standards. "Now you know; was it all you dreamed?"

Folding her arms over her chest, Padmé laughed shortly. "There's nothing impressive about it."

The way she said it was supposed to put him in his place; it implied he wasn't impressive either. Yet, for all that spite, Vader found himself still amused and shrugged his shoulders, never losing his grin. "That may be so, but you've wanted to know what's in here ever since I found you trying to break in." He paused, taking a moment to close down the information link just in case she got bold enough to attempt to see his screen. "Come in. Take a look around. I know you want to."

Standing where she was, her expression skeptical, she appeared to be torn between wanting to accept his invitation and scorning it.

"Well?" Extending his hand, knowing she wouldn't be expecting it, his grin shifted into an almost challenging smile. "Come in."

Nonplussed, Padmé's gaze darted back to his and, as he watched she seemed to make some kind of decision. As if seeing he meant it, was sincere about wanting her to come in — and he was. He crooked his fingers, bending them at the middle digit, as if beckoning her. Slowly, ever so slowly, he watched her come to the decision that she could afford to take him up on his offer, and her feet tentatively crossed the threshold.

It was a small victory to have her compliance but, mindful of the fact she seemed less than impressed with him in that moment, he refrained from gloating. Instead he watched as she came fully into the room, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands behind his head. He waited until she'd done a quick scan and was starting to look around more closely at their surroundings before speaking.

"You're right about it not being impressive. It's just a dull, ordinary office. Probably like what you had when you were planning all your attacks and ways to undermine me."

Her icy regard pinned him for a moment once more before resuming her inventory of the room. Her tone, when she finally spoke, was curt. "Mine was smaller."

Frowning, Vader leaned forward, placing his elbows on the desk and folded his hands in front of him. It was a telling comment — more in the way she said it than anything — and he couldn't keep his doubt from his voice. "Really?"

Padmé turned, her words bitter, if somewhat resigned, as she took two steps towards him, waving her hand to take in the sparsely furnished areas. "I didn't have the luxury of such a large ship like you do. I made due with what I could find."

He *almost* laughed. As if the size of her office meant anything; no matter how small it had been, she'd used it to its maximum effectiveness in being a thorn in his side. "I see."

The look she sent him said she knew that he probably did, before she turned her attention back to the office. Stepping around the room, she trailed her fingers over the various surfaces and Vader watched her. He knew what she was doing — attempting to memorize by look and feel anything she might use to her benefit at a later time should she ever get into his office again.

Which, he knew, was unlikely.

She seemed to draw the same conclusion even as her gaze lingered on his computer. Abruptly she turned to walk out, her route intersecting the end of his desk.

With a nudge of one booted foot against the corner of his desk, Vader slid in her direction and grabbed Padmé's arm as she passed. "Come here," he instructed, sliding his hand down to hers and pulling her towards him.

She tugged to break free, but his grip was implacable; unbreakable. The chair inched her way with her struggle, but Vader planted a foot, frowning, and it stopped. "Come here. I have something to show you."

"Whatever it is, I'm sure I don't want to see it."

His smile turned haughty; certain. "Oh, I'm sure you do."

"No, I don— *ah!*"

Releasing her arm, he caught her about the waist as she made to escape, pulling her down into his lap.

“Stop it!” Her cry and immediate struggle confirmed to him that she had no desire to be there, but he held her tight. “Let me go!”

“Padmé!”

His tone was sharper than intended, his hands sliding around her middle as she was wrapped in his arms, her backside squarely planted across his thighs. Her squirming was reminding him of other moments they’d once shared in office chairs — moments he knew she’d like to forget. Moments he wanted to repeat, but not like this.

“Sit still — or we’ll be doing more than just sitting.”

She froze, her breathing harsh, her form rigid in his grasp. Yet, for all her pretense, he could see the way her pulse galloped quickly at the junction of her neck; the way her nostrils flared; the way the flush of her skin spoke of wanting what she was so struggling to resist. With a smile she didn’t see, Vader kept one arm about her as he pushed back to his desk, reaching for the keypad.

A couple of clicks later and a file opened; one he’d watched innumerable times — and one he’d not been intending to share with her again just yet, but her absence earlier had made this seem right. Perhaps *this* would remind her of what they’d once shared; of how destined they were to be together. Of how they’d fought the odds and won because they couldn’t bear to be apart. Of how good they’d once been and could be again if she’d simply stop fighting him and love him the way he knew she could.

Twisting the screen, he turned it to make a holo emitter and flattened it out before touching the screen to make it begin. A projection appeared; an image of a place he’d never forgotten and the people they’d once been.

Holding her as tightly as he was, there was no mistaking the way her shoulders slumped as the file began to play, or the way her eyes followed each nuance, the magic of the day enveloping her once more. Sliding his right arm back around her waist with his left, he pressed his back to hers and placed his chin on her shoulder.

Not quite as rigid as she’d intended to be in his grasp, Padmé was unable to help herself from catching a sharp breath as the image of herself in her wedding finery appeared once again. Her heart clenched, an emotional detonation like a bomb going off in her chest, amplified by *his* presence. The man before her and the man who held her were worlds — *galaxies!* — apart and nothing emphasized it more in that moment than Anakin’s sweet smile.

It only intensified when Vader began to speak, using what she privately begun to think of as his ‘Anakin’ voice.

“That was the happiest day of my life.”

And hers.

Tears flooded her eyes and she determinedly bit them back, struggling to find the equilibrium her walk had restored; to find the core of ice she’d been so determined to regain. Only it was gone. Washed away by the power of the memory coupled with his words. She

ached knowing what he'd once been, wishing with every fiber of her being that he was that man again and knowing it would do no good.

Vader seemed oblivious to her inner turmoil — or choosing to ignore it. “You looked so beautiful that day. I knew I was the luckiest man in the galaxy.” His thumb stroked her stomach through her shirt. “Do you remember, my love?”

The question passed unanswered, for Padmé had once again been captivated by the holo. By the younger Anakin, as he'd been before darkness had claimed him — but not before it had touched him. That darkness and his remorse, she'd acknowledged, had simply made him more human. How could she have possibly known that it was but a fraction of the evils he would once be capable of committing?

Watching the holo with Vader was torture, a reminder of everything she'd lost and could never get back. It was a reminder of everything he'd used to be, of what they'd once meant to one another, but never could again. As the holo zoomed in on their faces to begin reciting their vows, she found she couldn't take anymore.

Lurching to her feet and free of his hold, she gripped the desk for balance. “I can't do this.”

The unexpected move, that shouldn't have been, coupled with her raw denial, had Vader reaching out to grab her hand as she pushed away from the desk. “Padmé!”

She struggled, prying at his fingers, her gaze flying to his even as she knew she couldn't fully shield her emotions from him. Even if he didn't see them, he'd sense them. “Don't do this to me.”

“Do what?” his eyes flashed with the beginning of temper. “You're telling me you can't even watch a clip of our wedding are you?”

“And see the man you once were, the man I married? No!”

He tugged on her hand, but Padmé pulled the other way, managing to get her hands free as she stumbled away.

His expression changed as she escaped, his eyes narrowing. “You don't want to remember how happy we were, how in love we were?”

“How...” She covered her mouth with one hand, knowing he'd see the pain and longing in her eyes but unable to do anything to help it. “...I do remember. But it isn't the same now.”

“It can be.” His tone lowered, the anger disappearing as his gaze turned both challenging and heated. “All you have to do is let it.”

A shiver raced through her system, her body responding even as she willed it not to, making her uncomfortably *aware* of him and what he promised even as she shook her head. “It's too late. Things can never be how they once were.” She backed up, her foot connecting with the wall next to the door. “You're not that person anymore.”

Standing, Vader stepped towards her, and her eyes widened as he cupped her face in both hands, his touch surprisingly gentle. “Only because you don't want to see it.”

His words were like a trigger, stroking the embers of her irritation. Lifting her hands, she batted his away, speaking as much to deny him as to remind herself. “What is there to see? You’re *not* the man that I married. You’re somebody completely different now.”

“No,” he denied softly, one hand snaking around her waist, the promise in his eyes unmistakable as he lowered his head to kiss her. “I’m not.”

“Yes,” she jerked free from his touch even as the move pressed her back against the wall. Her hand curled around the edge of the doorway, giving her an escape route without seeing one. ‘You are. Making me watch our wedding isn’t going to somehow make me think otherwise. Anakin is the man I loved and married. Not what you are now — Darth Vader.’ There was a flicker of something — temper? — in his eyes as Padmé took a deep breath to continue. “I meant what I said about wanting you... wanting *Anakin* to come back to me. But I know now it can never happen. Anakin is gone. And it’s too painful to watch our wedding knowing I’ll never see *him*— the man I truly love — again.”

Her hand tightened around the door frame and she used it for leverage. Looking Vader straight in the eye and letting him see the truth behind her raw words, she tilted her head, and then pulled herself around and through the doorway to escape.

Vader followed, one hand gripping the jamb above his head as he reached for her. “Padmé!”

Rounding on him, unable to keep a plea from her voice, she knew her words were harsh — but they needed to be. He needed to see that this... campaign to win her back wasn’t going to work.

“Stop it! Please! Just leave me alone. I can never love you again the way you want me to. It’s not possible. And what happened in your bedchamber and training salle means nothing. *Nothing!* They don’t change anything or how I feel about you.”

Turning from him again, Padmé side stepped the table and sofa only to stop dead at Vader’s deliberate and clipped retort.

“*It changes everything Padmé.* The way you responded to my touch when I made love to you; I know you still love me. You’re just too stubborn to admit it. Eventually you will. And I have all the time in the galaxy to wait until you do.”

His gall brought her back around; the very fact he’d remind her of her captivity *now*, of all times, raising her hackles. Only to have Vader give her a supremely cocky smirk before releasing the jamb and the door to his office closing with a soft *click*. The sound of the lock engaging wasn’t missed as it seemed to echo in the silence.

Her hands balled into fists at her side as she fought the urge to throw something. Arrogant... conceited... insufferable... *man!*

Glaring at the panel for a long minute, Padmé abruptly turned on her heel and stalked to the viewport. Slamming her hands down on the ledge, she took in the planet below without really seeing it even as she struggled with Vader’s declaration. Her chest ached, as if there were a weight on it, threatening to drown her, and she had to fight for composure.

Vader was wrong.

He had to be.

His arrogance blinded him to the fact that what he took for love was in fact lust. The hard truth was that she still desired his body, still desired the oblivion only his touch could bring, but even in those moments of denial, she couldn't say it out loud. Wouldn't *give* him the kind of power she seemed to be able to take from others.

If he knew... pushing the thought away, Padmé inhaled deeply and counted backwards from ten.

No matter what else Vader believed, she would never, ever, make the mistake of telling him just how much she craved the oblivion of his touch. To give him that kind of ammunition against her would be tantamount to personal suicide and Padmé, no matter what he currently believed thanks to her health, did not have a death wish.

No.

Somehow, somehow, she needed to keep her distance but even as she thought it, she knew it was futile; she was too close to the situation as it was and getting closer every day. Still... it was a nice thought while it lasted.

Month Twenty Four, Day 22 PEF

Chapter 60

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Twenty Two PEF

After his latest confrontation with his wife, Vader's mood didn't improve. Not through the evening when he told her to eat something and gotten no response; not through the long night in his lonely bed and certainly not in the morning when Padmé hadn't seemed to have moved from the viewport where he'd found her after returning to their suite from his office.

That she was still withholding herself from him, still refusing to let him help especially when he could sense the way her thoughts continued to dwell on the twins, hurt.

Not only hurt, but festered, like a wound that couldn't heal because he knew she'd *willingly* turned to another man in a way that she now refused him. Not simply refused, but actively fought against for all she'd succumbed twice. Every time he looked at her, every time she flinched from his touch or turned away, he couldn't help but be reminded of the fact that she'd have turned to *that slicer* if given the chance.

It was galling and insulting... and ultimately obsessing.

With Asajj out hunting Threepio and Max and having nothing further to report, Vader found he couldn't leave well enough alone. The reminders were too much, pushing against his conscious mind from where he'd thrust them in the back, now refusing to be as silent as he'd bid.

What really hurt on top of it all was that he'd done nothing any different from what he'd done in his marriage to Padmé before. And now that they were *finally* able to live together as they should have from the start of their marriage, Padmé refused to accept it. No, instead she'd rather have been with someone else; someone who wasn't *him*.

Everything was tied together and revolved one around the other. Padmé wanted their children back and he wanted their children to be with her. She didn't want his help and he was trying to help without hurting her further. She refused to see that he was still the same man she'd married while he was trying to prove it — and seemed to be failing.

Part of him wished they could speak frankly about the twins; about who had taken them and how to find them. Yet, he hesitated, balked in fact, at the idea. He had no wish to bring her more grief, to make their absence more difficult for her. His own search thus far had provided very few leads and he had no wish to get her hopes up only to dash them.

Knowing his thorough investigation would eventually bear fruit didn't distract Vader from the fact she'd been searching far longer than he and with few results. Not just searching, but searching with *that man's* help; searching with the intention of keeping him from his children. Hurt and rage were tangled up into one, his desire to see the slicer pay for touching what was rightfully his conflicting with the need to shield Padmé from further hurt. Still, if given the opportunity, Vader knew he'd show no mercy to the interloper.

Even as he thought about the tangled mess, Vader realized thinking about it would do no good; the *speculation* was enough to distract him from important business. Business that could get him killed if he didn't handle it in a fashion that would garner no suspicion.

Business that, thankfully, had a lull this morning.

Business that, regretfully, had a lull this morning.

It gave him time to think, to reflect, to consider — and it made him crazy. Leaving his office on the bridge, he headed for his quarters and his wife. He had questions that needed answers, if only for his own peace of mind, and Padmé was the only one who could give them.

Curled on the sofa, her arms wrapped around her knees and her chin on top, Padmé stared out the viewport without really seeing the Naboo-like planet. She could *just* catch a glimpse if she straightened, but found it was depressing. Unintentionally, she was certain, it was a reminder of everything she'd left behind and everything she would never be able to show her children.

Children she had no way of finding, trapped as she was on Vader's ship.

Closing her eyes, she tilted her chin and pressed her forehead to her knees, squeezing her legs with her arms. Luke and Leia were out there somewhere; calling to her, *yearning* for her to find them. And, as the days progressed, she found the dreams were getting worse.

Two nights ago she'd managed to catch a nap on the floor in Vader's chambers — her best sleep in many, many days — with him unaware of her presence. She hadn't dared go back, even when she'd woke this morning to another, similar nightmare. Her twins, her precious babies, crying for her and she unable to reach them.

Without thinking, her hand stole to her waist and the velveteen pouch she'd reattached to her belt. Dipping inside, she clutched the broken pieces of japor, feeling them dig into her palm. *Luke*, she cried silently, wishing they could hear her even as she tried to picture what they'd look like now, *Leia; mommy misses you. You have... no idea how much!*

Yet, with her eyes pressed against her knees, Padmé found she couldn't envision them. As babies, her only dim memory of them was their cries and a couple of pink, flailing limbs. She could distinguish no detail, remember no defining marks, and she bit back a sob as she realized her babies would no longer *be* babies.

They'd be almost two; entering a stage her mother had once described as the best and worst of motherhood. It hit her with the strength of a lightning bolt that the month long anniversary of her capture would be their birthday — in just nine days.

Nine days.

Tugging the japor from the pouch with enough force to nearly tear it from her belt, she lifted her head even though she didn't need to see to put them together. Shaking fingers held them together as her legs slid forward, her thumbs brushing across the symbol for good fortune and it was almost as if it mocked her. As if it said things would have turned out differently if they'd already been in possession of the pieces.

Her throat closed.

Nine days until Empire day; the twin's *second* birthday.

Another birthday she had precious little chance of spending with them and just another hallmark of all she'd missed. Another milestone; another precious memory stolen before it could be made. Like their first smiles, first words, saying Mama or Dada and taking first steps — all things they would have done by now. All things she ached to see herself and knew she never would; for her first time witnessing it would not be theirs.

Some other woman was being called 'mother'; some other woman was there to celebrate the miracle that should have been hers.

The knowledge was enough to break her hold on control and ragged sobs tore loose from her throat. With the broken japor clutched tightly against her heart, she curled forward around the only good piece of her past she had left.

Vader entered his suite with a nod to the Commander of Padmé's security detail, noting that she would be within since they were present. The door closed behind him as he stepped further into the suite. "Padmé?"

There was no answer to his query as he strode past the empty kitchenette, searching for her at the viewport, only to find it too, was vacant. Frowning, his gaze dropped to the sofa — and froze. His frown slowly disappeared as he noted the slow rise and fall of her shoulders, her body hunched forward and to the side and her head turned away from him.

Kicking off his boots with a heel-toe pull so not to disturb her, he padded on silent feet around the sofa. There, he stopped, his heart twisting in his chest as he took in her tear stained face and the two pieces of japor. One lay in a loosely cupped hand, the other nearby, as if the hand had fallen while she slept and a piece escaped.

Sighing softly, he settled on the edge of the low table, his gaze drifting back to her face. Tears. He'd always hated seeing Padmé cry and now was no exception. Watching her sleep, seeing how the tears continued their slow slide even in slumber, her pain palpable even now, he knew without asking that she thought of the twins.

The twins.

The children he and Padmé had created out of love; children she was determined to deny him when they were found. And, despite the fact she was thoroughly against his search for them, he refused to desist. Luke and Leia were his children too and he wasn't about to let their absence continue to wreak havoc on their mother.

Not that she'd thank him for it when that time came.

Or turn to him for comfort despite the ease she'd found, twice, in his arms. Or talk to him. Or share her burden without needing to pry the information from her. Or let him help her. Or forgive him for not being there and stopping the theft of their children. Or...

Or.

Or.

Or.

Vader rubbed one hand over his face, never taking his gaze from his wife. Watching as she shifted fractionally in her sleep, her fingers relaxing all the more on the other piece of japor, he wished he could do something, *anything* to help her.

Or rather, that she'd be willing to accept that help.

He hated seeing her like this; strong and yet broken. For the spine of durasteel she'd always had was still present, evident in the way she refused him over and over again. That, and in the way she continued to blame him for the way the twins had been taken. As if he could have done something to stop it; with Obi-Wan's betrayal, his former Jedi partner had knowingly deprived not only himself of Padmé, but he and Padmé of the chance to be parents and everything that entailed.

His hand clenched unthinkingly. If he ever found Obi-Wan, he was going to make the Jedi pay dearly for that alone.

Perhaps then Padmé would be able to see he was just as upset about their absence as she; more so. It made him powerless to help her, had destroyed her trust in him and robbed him of the woman he'd married. She was still there, somewhere, but smothered underneath the layers of pain and bitterness he'd never have thought her capable of harboring.

Examining her in the rare moment of unguarded slumber, he couldn't help but note — once again — just how clearly she was fading away. Veins that would normally be hidden by her body's robust health stood out in stark contrast, lines of blue against the edges of her bones as they pressed close against her skin. The angles of her face, more defined than he'd ever before seen them, giving her an almost predatory look in their very sharpness. Hollows and shadows on her skin that he'd never before seen — and the obvious bruising from the day before across her knuckles and forearms where she'd struck the droid with force.

With a shake of his head, he leaned forward to collect the pieces of the japor snippet, lifting the one from the couch without so much as a graze against her, his thumb tracing over the now-smooth edge where it had been broken. Even as he did so, his heart twisted in his chest, a frown crossing his lips. She shouldn't have broken it; if he'd know she would break it... With a grimace, he didn't quite know how to finish that thought.

If he'd known she would eventually break it, would he have given it to her anyway? Probably; he'd have done it with the belief he could change her mind and prevent it.

Prying back her fingers fractionally, he reached for the other half. Padmé shifted, murmuring in her sleep. Her head thrashed in a single jerk, tears sparkling on her eyelashes as his hand lifted the other piece free of her hand; a hand that closed almost immediately as his touch left hers.

"Max... stay..."

He froze, his eyes narrowing in on her face, but she was finished, her head dropping back to her chest, the hand that had been clenched tight now slack once more. She was here in his domain, had shared his meals, his time, his *bed* — and she was mumbling another man's *name* in her sleep?

The desire for answers — and retribution — reared itself once more and he just barely contained himself from waking her then and there to demand the answers to his questions. *Max*. He loathed the man and he'd never even met the walking corpse; the fact he'd dared touch the woman who belonged to him was enough.

His hands clenched, the rounded edge of the japor snippet's pieces digging into his hand as he stared down at his wife, his brain galloping a mile a minute. The significance of the broken japor suddenly seemed to burn through his hand and into his gut, making his heart bleed. She'd broken the japor when she'd decided he was beyond 'redemption', when she'd begun seeing him as dead to her.

A gift, no doubt, for her new lover.

Anger roared through his blood at the revelation, a desire to *hurt* someone, a particular someone by the name of Max, driving him to his feet. How dare she take a gift of his and break it with the intention of gifting it to another man? How *dare* she take something that he'd worked so hard for, sweated over to get *just* right, and demean it with such a betrayal!

It would serve her right if he kept them, repairing the damage she'd wrought and kept it. No matter what she saw them as once, he would *not* let her gift another man with his hard work. For even daring to *think* it, he felt an almost overwhelming desire to teach her a lesson; this was one matter in which she would *never* cross him again.

The japor pieces clutched tightly in his hand, his lips set in a firm line, Vader entered his office and set the door to remain open. The better, he decided, to hear her when she woke and couldn't find her *precious* japor. His lips curled into a sneer as he swept into the office and nearly threw himself in his chair.

He couldn't wait to hear her frantically searching for what wasn't there

Slapping his hand down on the desk, he left the japor pieces where they fell. Stabbing the power controls on his terminal, he entered his password and pulled up his files on Padmé's group. From those files, he ran a narrow search for 'slicer' and 'Max', separating the information into another file for further viewing. Something in there had to lead him to the man; something had to give him the clue he needed to extract his revenge.

When the search completed, Vader opened several other folders, running Max's last name through a filter on the main Coruscant database where all birth records in the galaxy were housed. The search would no doubt draw the attention of his Master, but at the moment, Vader didn't care. He could explain Max's search away later as friend of the Jedi who'd granted assistance. It wouldn't, he knew with a decidedly cold smile, be a lie.

It wasn't long, as he was sorting through the database information — maybe a half hour — before he heard Padmé stir. Her emotional response was subdued as she woke and suddenly spiked as she came to full wakefulness. He heard her move around, his attention no longer focused on the screen before him and instead smiling with an almost unholy smugness as he felt her begin to grow agitated, the sound of rummaging and shifting clearly audible through the open door of his office.

No doubt searching for the precious pieces of japor she'd been intending to give *that man*; served her right. He relished the feel of it as her agitation turned into fear, that fear into panic

— fed off it as a balm to his smarting ego. After this, she'd never make the mistake of gifting something he'd given her to *anyone* else.

Pushing to his feet as her panic escalated, he collected the two pieces and strode to the doorway to find her attempting to move the sofa — no doubt to search underneath it. All around her the pillows, cushions and blankets were strewn in a haphazard fashion. Leaning one shoulder against the door jamb, he lifted the hand holding the japor pieces and silently called on the Force, levitating them above his palm. Once there, and only once there, did he draw her attention to him.

“Looking for these?”

She jerked, obviously startled by his presence, and spun to face him as she regained her feet. Her gaze met his for a fraction of a second before zeroing in on the levitating objects. Her relief was palpable even as her agitation spiked, drawing Vader further into the black anger that held him in its grip.

Crossing the room, Padmé made a grab for the pieces only to let out a cry when they suddenly flew upwards towards the ceiling, well beyond her reach. Anger, similar to what boiled through his veins, sparked in her words.

“Give those back.”

Vader stared at her darkly but said nothing, perversely gratified to feel her distress for the first time since her awakening.

“Give those back to me. They're mine.”

Ignoring her demand, he released his force grip on the snippet and lifted his hand, catching them as they fell. Choosing to shift the conversation slightly, he focused on what she'd said about the snippet before he'd had his revelation. There would be time for that accusation later, once she'd fallen into his trap. “You never did tell me exactly why the snippet is broken. Other than you claim it reminds you of what we had. Surely, there must be some other reason.”

Indignation cross her features. “It also reminds me of what's lost. And besides, you never really asked me.”

“Yes I did.” He interjected a patronizing tone into her voice, knowing it would irritate her. ‘But if I must, I'll ask it again. Why is the japor broken?’ She opened her mouth to respond, but Vader continued as if she had deliberately declined to do so. “I know it's been a long time but I put a lot of effort into making it. Not only did I want you to remember me, I also wanted you to know how much you meant to me. So tell me, Padmé, why did you destroy something I worked so hard to create?”

She laughed and shook her head. “I could ask you the same thing.” The dark mirth in her eyes immediately faded. “Why did *you* destroy something *I* worked so hard to create?”

“You, yourself, said the Republic was weak.” He couldn't help the smugness in his tone; “I was merely doing what I could to help make it stronger.”

“By helping turn it into an Empire!”

Shouting the words didn't give them any further impact; he was sick of the same old argument and wasn't going to get into this with her again. He had a purpose for his questions and wouldn't be deterred. Ignoring her irate expression, he regarded her intently as he waited for her to confirm his certainty. "Just answer my question."

As if sensing his thoughts, she hesitated and then, to his surprise, she turned her back on him as if to say the conversation was at an end. "No. It's none of your business. You don't *deserve* to know."

Reaching out, his fingers closed tightly about her arm, dragging her to a halt and back around to face him; her actions irked him, fanning the flames of his anger, and he couldn't help the menacing hiss as he started to speak. "*Everything* about you is my business. Including this." Opening his other hand, he wrenched the twin pieces of japor into the air using the Force, allowing them to float in front of Padmé's face. "Now tell me why it's broken."

She declined to answer him, ignored him for all intents and purposes, and instead reached out to try and grasp the pieces. Seeing it well before it was coming, the pieces shot once again towards the roof and out of her reach. Noting the panicked expression, a sneer found its way into his voice.

"Why do you need them Padmé? What were you going to do with them?" She remained stubbornly silent, reaching towards the ceiling, and Vader sprung his trap, asking nastily, "Was your plan to give one to your precious Max?"

Her gaze shot back to his, surprise and shock rippling at him through the Force even as he read it in her expression.

His suspicion confirmed, his grip tightened on her upper arm and he shook her once, angrily. "You were, weren't you? You broke the japor so you could have a piece for yourself and give the other one to Max. Was that your intention? To laugh at what we had, to make a mockery of it?"

"I would *never* make a mockery of what we had!" Her words lashed him, as she denied his accusation, planting her feet and straining back against his hold. "*You're* the one who did that! You're the one who claims to love me yet you forced Asajj to be with you."

His voice dropped, lethally calm and steady; Vader at his worst. "And you gave yourself willingly, didn't you, to Max — every time."

She stared at him, her brown eyes wide and incredulous, as if she couldn't believe his accusation or the fact he'd voiced it. As if... as if he was *wrong* about her and the conclusion he'd drawn. As if she couldn't believe his focus on Max and her relationship; as if she couldn't credit his accusation as more than ridiculous.

Shaking her head as if to straighten her thoughts, she finally pinned him with an even stare. "I'm not arguing with you about this." She told him, her own tone deliberately level. "But, I do have this to say; if I wanted to make a mockery like you accuse me of, then why do I still have the two pieces? Max was with me long enough that he would have one of them *right now* and *he'd be wearing it!* He knows nothing about the japor's history other than it's a token I have and the pieces are something I planned to give to Luke and Leia when I found them! *The japor has nothing to do with Max!*"

Her response was like a physical sucker punch below the belt, taking the air from his lungs as if she's struck him with a large hammer. His grip slackened and Padmé used the opportunity to pry his fingers off, but surprisingly, didn't leave as he struggled with the unexpected revelation.

Unable to credit his ears, it took several long moments of repeating her words in his head before he was able to accept it and discard his own conclusion. Luke and Leia. She'd meant them for Luke and Leia; their children. He swallowed hard, needing to hear her confirm it. "They're meant for Luke and Leia?"

She nodded. "Yes."

Inexplicably touched and humbled by the realization, he stared at her almost as shocked as he'd ever been; only her unexpected announcement that she was pregnant had ever had such a result. And the announcement of her death, but that had been the opposite kind of shock and he didn't like to dwell. No, her words banished the thought of her death and instead brought only thoughts of their children. Children she had wanted to give a piece of *him*.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I told you a minute ago," she replied evenly.

"That's not what I meant."

Her chin tilted, as if expecting a blow. "Because you don't deserve to know."

It didn't hurt any less than it had before and Vader deliberately masked the shaft of pain that lanced through him like a blade. Focusing not on the fact that he hadn't been supposed to know, but the very fact of her intentions, he chose his words carefully. "Yet you feel my children deserve to have the snippet; a reminder of me."

Deliberately and with care, Padmé corrected him, crossing her arms over her chest with obvious annoyance. "A reminder of the man you once were, not what you are now."

His lips twisted, amused despite the sting of her earlier remark, and waited. She didn't appear to be finished yet, and she didn't disappoint him.

"I want Luke & Leia to have something of the man who fathered them — the *good man*. I want them to know what he was like and how brave he was. How even as a little boy he risked his life to help me and my planet. How, as a Jedi, he fought in the Clone Wars and risked his life every day for the Republic; doing what he could to save lives and ensure the safety of others. How he was helping free star systems from the Separatists. I want Luke and Leia to know the man you were before you turned to the Dark Side."

Giving her his undivided attention, Vader perversely enjoyed watching as she warmed to the topic despite the fact he knew she was about to shred his character. Watching her, but keeping his expression deliberately blank, he took in what she had to say.

"I know it would just be a matter of time before they'd find out what happened to you — how their father, Anakin Skywalker, The Hero With No Fear became Darth Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith. But they'd know by then the man you once were and they'd keep that knowledge with them as they got older. They'd be able to look back and know that, despite what you've become, their father was once a great and brave man and whatever they would do, it would be

done in his honor. They'd be carrying on the legacy of Anakin Skywalker. And the japor pieces would be their connection to that."

It was said with passion, conviction and no small form of her special brand of oomph. A speech obviously long planned and long awaited in its execution; Padmé might have spoken from the heart, but she'd chosen her words with care and Vader knew he could have been himself or a room full of people — she'd always been able to captivate.

There were several long moments of silence before he lifted his hands and began to clap slowly, mockingly, a smirk crossing his lips. "Brava, Padmé. Excellent speech. It's a shame you left politics."

Her reaction was completely unexpected and he was a split second too late to react as her hand shot out, connecting painfully with the side of his face. "*Go to hell!*"

A lifetime of taking such blows schooled his reaction to minimize the damage even as his hand shot out to catch her wrist in a punishing grip. His cheek stung, the blood rushing to the sensitized area and he knew without looking it would leave an imprint of her hand. Anger and hurt fueled his words as he lifted his free hand to touch the area gingerly, glaring at her. "I meant it when I said you will not hit me again."

Anger fueled her own words as she didn't allow him to continue. "And you will not scorn the only thing I have of their father to give Luke and Leia." Tears swamped her eyes, making them shine, and hit him harder than a blow to the face ever could; he'd never liked seeing Padmé cry and had never, ever wanted to be the cause of it. She tugged her hand free of his grip with a jerk and stepped back; as if being so close to him sullied her — and maybe it did. "The japor is all I have to give Luke and Leia and you dare to ridicule it? Only you would be so cruel."

His anger drained away; hearing her, seeing her, and being able to *feel* the hurt his callous remark had caused took the proverbial wind out of his sails as she continued.

"And honestly, the only reason I said *anything* at all is because of the crazy idea you got about Max. Otherwise, I wouldn't have told you a damned thing. And I realize now I never should have because you just don't understand." Swallowing her tears, she thrust one hand, palm up and fingers extended, to Vader. "Give them back to me. They're all I have left."

Guilt crept in, gnawing at his gut; he'd overstepped, allowed his jealousy to control him. In doing so, he'd crossed the line he'd promised he wouldn't with regards to her and their children. He'd *promised* not to make this harder for her, and he'd done the exact opposite.

Without looking, he drew the halves down from the ceiling, plucking them from the air without dropping her gaze. Taking a single step towards her, he caught her hand with one and placed the japor in the center of her palm. Curling her fingers over top the precious cargo, he squeezed gently, the apology he knew she deserved sticking in his throat. Somehow, words didn't seem like enough and he did his best to convey with his eyes that he was sorry; that he would *never* cross that line again.

Yanking her hand away, Padmé folded her hands together, her eyes filled with disgust before she turned her back on him; no more than he deserved after this latest infraction. Her words were cold, masking the hurt he knew she still felt. "Go back to what you're doing."

Looking at her for a long moment, Vader finally shook his head once and turned on his heel, heading back to his office as she'd suggested. She'd given him a lot to think about before he could speak with her again. Her intentions, her motives — and his own behavior.

Yet, despite it, a part of him rejoiced; the broken japor had nothing to do with Max.

Month Twenty Four, Day 23 & 24 PEF

Chapter 61

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Twenty Three PEF

The elation didn't last.

Vader hadn't been able to bring himself to return to his suite after his confrontation with Padmé the day before; the argument had run around and around in his head, not leaving him in peace and distracting him from the aspects of his job that should have been all involved. He'd delegated, promoting some random Lieutenant to handle it while he brooded and escaped to his office on the bridge.

Let someone else deal with it for a time; he could always snap the man's neck later if he didn't like the way it had been done.

Night passed into morning and morning into afternoon as Vader stared at the screen of his workstation without really seeing it. Padmé's hurt-filled words filled his ears, ringing through his skull and reverberated within him painfully as they were hurled at him again and again. He could hear the speech about who he'd been and how she hadn't said just how precious those memories were to her; she hadn't needed to when the context was the gift she intended to give their twins.

"I want Luke & Leia to have something of the man who fathered them — the good man. I want them to know what he was like and how brave he was. How even as a little boy he risked his life to help me and my planet. How, as a Jedi, he fought in the Clone Wars and risked his life every day for the Republic; doing what he could to save lives and ensure the safety of others. How he was helping free star systems from the Separatists. I want Luke and Leia to know the man you were before you turned to the Dark Side."

He exhaled, rubbing his hands over his face, not realizing that Padmé had been telling him this for weeks and it had taken this particular discussion for them to really sink in. He'd needed to be vulnerable, *jealous*, to actually *hear* her point of view.

She longed for the man who'd once supported her and her ideals; the man he'd been before the corruption of the Republic had eaten away at his faith, exposed by his Master's manipulations, and severed any responsibility he'd felt towards keeping it intact. *That* man was the man she would speak of to their children. Not how he was now — a powerful Sith — but a man who'd done everything in his power to be with the woman he'd fallen for as a small child.

What she'd failed to see was that he was *still* that man; he'd simply grown up.

Still, in his search for her, he'd never expected she wouldn't want to be with him; that he would be fighting the ghost of *himself* to win her back. A ghost that wasn't a ghost because he

wasn't the one who had supposedly died. That she was disinclined to see him as he was stung less at that moment because of what she'd told him and why. His children would have known the man he'd been before they'd been introduced to the man he'd become and somehow that was both humbling and fitting.

He wanted to know his children, but the fact that Padmé had been intending to share all of who he was with them, including the token of his love for her...

How could he have *ever* though the japor was for anyone *but* Luke and Leia?

Regardless of the fact Padmé hadn't told him — and how much *that* still hurt — he should have picked up on the fact that she was saddest, but strongest, when she held them tight. She was in the most pain, but the most capable of dealing with it, when they were in her hand. They gave her purpose, were a symbol of their children because she didn't even have the memory of their faces.

He *should* have interpreted the facts, seen them, noted them — and he had, but he'd dismissed them. Now, with the puzzle perfectly aligned for him to see, he wondered how he could have ever reached the conclusion that Padmé had intended to give a part of the japor to *Max* of all people. The notion, in hindsight, was ludicrous and she'd been more than justified throwing it in his face. Not just her words, but now — knowing what he knew and how he'd hurt her — the imprint she'd left on his cheek at the time was more than earned and less than he deserved.

Her anger, her hurt as he'd dared suggest they were for anyone but whom she'd intended, were like razor blades eating away at his insides. And, what was worse, was that he could still see her expression, hear the desolation underlying her words even as she'd planted some barbs of her own.

"The japor is all I have to give Luke and Leia and you dare to ridicule it? Only you would be so cruel."

Cruel.

It wasn't the first time that particular trait had been attributed to him, but it was the first time his wife had ever called him that. Their connection had always been a passionate one; big explosions no matter the context, but this... this was something different. This was Padmé really meaning what she said and picking her words for the greatest impact even as she spoke from the heart.

She truly believed him to be cruel.

And, the worst of it was, she wasn't wrong. He'd been so consumed by jealousy, believing that she'd taken the very symbol of his love for her and damaged it with the intention of giving it to another man, he'd never even considered another option. Especially not the most obvious option with Padmé being so distraught.

And he should have.

I'm a fool, he thought softly, rubbing his hands over his face again in an attempt to banish the images but having no luck. *I'm a fool and in my foolishness, I've hurt her. I've hurt Padmé!*

Oh, she'd said it to him plenty; accusing him of destroying everything she's ever held dear, but he'd believed himself justified. Her life was worth any price, even if she couldn't see it. But this... this was something he watched happen, powerless inside the prison of his rage to check himself before making that fatal blunder. He'd watched, helpless, as his words had set off a detonation of anguish so intense it hadn't truly hit her yet.

Even so, it had been reflected in her eyes, her voice; it had been in the way she'd slapped him and torn herself free from his grip. In everything she'd done, everything she'd said — every *look* they'd shared, it lay between them like a chasm that continued to get deeper with every blunder.

This was a hurt he could see, a consequence he'd felt; and aftermath he could *see*...

And it was killing him.

With the way it was eating him up inside, it was no surprise he couldn't concentrate on anything else; nothing. Not even how to fix it because, what was worse, was there *wasn't* a way to fix it. He'd crossed the invisible line, the one that said he was on her side; the one that said he would never, *ever*, use the twins against her. The one that said he understood just how terrible it was for her to be a mother without her children or even knowledge of them. The one that said he was a father in the same situation and he refused to use it to his advantage.

Their children; Luke and Leia.

Inspiration struck.

He straightened at his console, almost slamming his hands down on the keyboard as he brought the workstation out of the standby mode. If he could locate the twins, if he could bring them home and *show* Padmé in doing so that he truly understood what she was going through, perhaps he could make amends for his insensitivity.

Keying in the codes for the head of the small team he'd employed for the side, and very much off the record, search he didn't have long to wait before the call was answered.

The female human on the other end inclined her head in greeting. "*My Lord Vader; to what do I owe this honor?*"

"Your progress update, Cleek."

Her half smile faded. "*I regret to inform you that nothing had panned out from the lead we had previously discovered, Lord Vader. The twins were infants; too young to be the children you seek.*"

Vader tapped a couple of things on his keyboard, sending the information with a press of a button. "Search these locations next; twins are a common occurrence on each of them and are more likely to present results."

"As you wish my Lord," she inclined her head again.

"Expand your search; the individuals who took them are no fools."

"With your instruction to be discreet, I'm afraid I have limited capability —"

“Hire more men, pay exorbitant bribes or kill the right people; I don’t care what it costs — I want them found *now!*”

Cleek bowed. “Yes, *my Lord.*”

Her image flickered and disappeared and Vader pushed himself away from the desk in disgust. Their search was slow going, far slower because Padmé refused to supply him with vital information, but after this last row he wasn’t about to ask for it again. If she was willing to talk with him at all, it would be a miracle.

Exhaling softly, he slid back to his computer and opened a new, encrypted file. If Cleek and her people couldn’t work any faster, he would simply have to do what he could to expedite the process.

Bespin — Month Twenty Four, Day Twenty Four PEF

Hood up, Asajj swept into the flow of foot traffic in the Bespin port.

Her fighter was docked under a false name, just as she’d registered under one, but if her query got wind of her true identity, he’d be gone before she could get close. A quick fly by of the docking facilities before landing had revealed a very familiar ship; the confirmation she’d needed to narrow her search. Referencing the signal’s strength on her datapad, she noted the location and cross checked it with the city map.

Cantina.

Of course, her lips curled; everything happened in a Cantina in a place like this. Cantina’s were not one of her favorite places... and it *wasn’t* because of the noise. Assassins like herself worked best in crowds when there was a target to eliminate and the Cantina atmosphere was convenient... except she had no use for the drugging sensations that came with the illegal substances found in such places and beings under such influences were unpredictable at best. They introduced the unknown factor into any equation and she preferred to avoid it.

But, in this case, the Cantina locale *could* work in her favor; it gave more options than it prevented and she had no wish to turn up empty handed.

Striding through the hallways, she appeared to ignore the beings about her even as she caught passing glimpses through the Force of each that came within a certain distance; glimpses that would help in the event one of them meant her harm.

Nothing.

As the almost luminescent clouds beyond slid by one another with little interaction, so did those beings around her ebb and flow. There were no threats to *her* here. The odd petty criminal glanced her way to size her up but, with a strong mental *push* in their direction with an aura of caution, they quickly determined she was no easy mark. Even without it, they’d have let her be, but she was taking no chances; she had no desire to have her mark flee before she found them.

Sliding into the Cantina’s dark interior, where the view ports had been darkened or covered, was like entering a cave. Most travelers who stayed hooded through the ultra light

corridors of the city gladly threw back their cowls as they entered, swamped with the classic music all Cantina's seemed to sport in the form of a live Bith band and the not so pleasant scent of dozens of beings mingling.

Slipping into the shadows easily, Asajj made her way about the perimeter, keeping an eye out for any clue as to the exact location within the area where she might find her prey. A Trandoshan side stepped her, heading for the bar, and as he moved aside, a booth in a nearby alcove caught her attention.

Or rather, the somewhat entertaining sight of a man that appeared to be at ease with a cloak covered droid who wasn't. The stiff posture under the fabric could only be a protocol droid and Asajj knew she'd found her target when she shifted around to get a glimpse of the man's face. He said something to the droid, an irritated gleam in his eyes as his lips twisted.

She backed away, turning, and spied a serving droid almost immediately. Keeping carefully out of the line of sight of the man in the booth, she approached the droid.

"How may I serve you?"

"The man in the booth," Asajj pitched her voice low, keeping one eye on him as she dropped a couple of credits on the tray in the droid's hands along with a data disk. "Send him a glass of your best — and this."

The droid acknowledged the order and Asajj slipped away, going to find another vantage point. Leaning against a pillar in the shadows, she waited. Patience didn't come as naturally as it should, but in this instance, she didn't dare approach her target until he followed the instructions on the disk.

If he didn't, her life would be almost as worthless as his.

He received his drink with raised eyebrows, lifting it to the room in a gesture of thanks to his unknown benefactor — and she smirked, almost laughing, when he proceeded to test the toxicity levels for poisons. It was good to see he'd not lost his sense of caution. Only then did he raise the glass to his lips and slid the disk into his datapad.

She watched him read it, waiting, knowing he'd not see her when his head suddenly snapped up, scanning the surrounding area. It was her cue.

Calling on the Force, Asajj *pulled* on the hood about the droid's head, drawing it down and over its optical sensors, effectively blinding it. It began to flail, the man turning, and she moved with Force enhanced speed and stealth to slip into the booth across from him as the droid suddenly shut down, bending forward in a recharge cycle as the man hit the 'off' switch. The droid was then turned, facing away from the shadowed table, before he turned back.

And stopped.

His hand dropped to his blaster immediately; belatedly — long seconds that Asajj could have used to kill him if she'd wanted him dead. She lifted her fingers from the table top to show she was currently unarmed, a smirk on her lips. "Is that any way to greet an old friend, Max?"

"We were hardly friends." He didn't pull the blaster, but left his hands on it. He took in her appearance. "Isn't the hood a little much?"

"For my safety as much as yours; it's not in the interest of your health to be seen speaking with me."

"Or yours, by that comment." His fingers twitched. "Have you come to eliminate me the way you did Padmé?"

"Now why," Asajj mused with a faint smile, the shadows of her hood giving her a feral appearance, "would you think that?"

"The last time I saw her, she was with you," Max hissed, leaning across the table to glare at the Adept. "Now, here you sit and she's still missing. Did she send you?"

"Why *ever* would she send me if she could come to you herself?"

"Maybe she can't."

"You were always smarter than you looked, Max." Asajj's lips curved into a cool smile. "Shall we test that theory?"

"Where is Padmé, Asajj?"

Her lips tightened into a thin line. "So far beyond your reach not even you can find her."

"But you know where she is."

The adept inclined her head.

Staring at her, Max seemed to realize this was the end of that conversation route and picked up his drink with a twist of his lips. "You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"Ah, proof," she smiled faintly. "I haven't long and the tale of what's occurred would take time we do not have. You are being hunted, Max."

"Hunted by whom?"

Her eyes glittered. "For the moment, only me."

He set his glass back on the table. "And now that you've caught me?"

"I want the droid."

"Threepio?" Max frowned. "Why would anyone *want* Threepio?"

"The reason is not important, but I either return with him or with you... and you would not like what awaits *you* on the end of that journey."

"He's for Padmé, isn't he?"

"He's for another, just as she is. Let me give you some advice, Max," she leaned across the table, her voice pitched to be heard no further than his ears. "As someone who's been betrayed by Padmé to another who has also been betrayed."

"She's never—"

Asajj held up one hand, silencing him, her eyes glittering dangerously. “Dallying with another man’s wife, especially a man as powerful as hers, will lead you to a very slow and violent end.”

“She’s a widow.”

“She’s lied to you!” Asajj brought her hand down, open palmed, against the table top. “Her husband is very much alive and he wants you dead; *that* is what I’m here!”

Silence was heavy in the booth for a long minute as Max took in that statement. He didn’t ask the obvious question though; why should he when Padmé was the one to whom he needed to pose them? “You work for him.” She said nothing and Max regarded her shrewdly, picking up his drink once more and taking a sip. “What are you afraid of, Asajj?”

“Heed my warning, Max,” she replied instead. “Let me take the droid to appease him and give you take the time to disappear. Change your name, your appearance; drift into obscurity as if you never existed. Run to the very ends of the galaxy and beyond if you value your own skin. Forget about Padmé; she’s beyond you reach.”

“I’m her friend, Asajj; I thought you were too.”

One dark lip curled back in a sneer. “Then consider this a friendly gesture. If I am sent to hunt you down again, I will have no choice but to bring you in and it *will* mean your death. Do you really want Padmé to witness it?”

He was silent, sipping his drink as he continued to considered her and her warning. “Then perhaps you should take me with you now and we can free Padmé together.”

“To what end?” Asajj’s words were hissed, angry. “There’s no ship, no crew, no *cause*. Trust me when I tell you this is out of your league.”

“Asajj—”

The sound of a blaster going off somewhere behind them had Asajj spinning out of her chair and into the nearby corner, lightsaber in hand but not ignited. She scanned the room as another bolt flashed by outside the alcove, and then another.

“You’re a fool, Max. A dead fool! When he finds you, your life will be forfeit and no one will be able to help you. Least of all Padmé or I.”

“Then why are you here, Asajj?”

“Because she betrayed you as much as she did me. I would hate for her arrogance to mean your demise. Leave the droid and run; you will not get another chance. I will not be able to give you one.”

“I can’t.”

“Then we part ways with the knowledge I will some day be forced to be the instrument that brings you to Vader for execution.” Asajj moved around the table and Max reached out to grasp her wrist. Her gaze dropped to his hand and then to his face. The surprise in his eyes, the suspicion, made her lips curl. “You don’t know.”

“What does Vader have to do with this?”

“He’s the one who wants you dead.”

“He killed her husband!”

“And he’ll kill you too.” Asajj’s smile was mirthless as she reached down and broke his hold without applying much pressure, wondering if he was really so blind as not to see that Vader was Padmé’s husband. If he was, she couldn’t bring herself to take off that blindfold despite the warning. It was better he didn’t know what hunted him for now and exactly *why*; it would help him escape. “Goodbye Max.”

She spun, taking up Threepio’s inert form in a single movement, and ducked away and into the firefight that had broken out in the Cantina. Not sparing Max another look, she headed straight out, ducking and dodging the melee that was slowly overtaking the blaster fire. She wanted no part of seeing where he went or what occurred.

It wasn’t until she was out and turning towards the corner that would take her to the hangar bay where she’d left her ship, that her name brought her up short.

“Asajj!”

Turning, her lightsaber at the ready, she looked back to see Max in the doorway of the Cantina. He lifted his blaster just as several others from within burst out, a hail of blaster fire forcing her to duck back and away, and she grinned, her first real smile of the day.

Should Vader probe her memories and find that particular scene, it would show him she’d been forced to abandon Max to collect Threepio. Excellent; intended or not, it would work out well.

Heading for her ship, she mentally calculated how long she could keep the droid in the rest cycle before it would need to be pulled out. If she was lucky and plotted her course carefully, she’d make it back to Vader’s flag ship before the droid was none the wiser. After having put up with it in Padmé’s company, she had no wish to speak with it ever again. If she did, it might not make it back to Vader and Asajj was determined not to fail on that count.

It was the only thing that would give Max a much needed reprieve; one that would allow him to slink away and vanish — hopefully. If he didn’t take it, her conscience was clear. She’d warned him. If he failed to heed it and she captured him, she would shed no tears.

Max was on his own.

Month Twenty Four, Day 26 PEF

Thanks for all your feedback guys; I know I don't say it enough, but I really do appreciate it!

So, in honor of the New Year... Post to 'match' each day until New Year's Eve — which we'll call "Empire Day"

Here goes...

I'm a couple behind so bear with me — 2 posts today

Chapter 62

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Twenty Six PEF

Curled up on the sofa, Padmé stared at the viewport without so much as a twitch, grateful that Vader had left with no more than a look in her direction that morning.

He'd almost caught her.

The last two nights had been hell, the nightmares intensifying in degrees she'd never experienced, leaving her hearing things, *seeing* things she knew weren't there but wanted to believe. So vivid were the images and sounds that she'd found herself seeking the unlikely refuge of Vader's floor, curled at the end of his bed to simply have the energy to resist him later when he pushed to know about the nightmares.

He knew.

She saw it in his gaze.

Not that she was sneaking into his room despite the fact she'd just barely escaped that morning when he'd woken a few minutes earlier than expected, but the fact her mental barriers were crumbling. Every knowing look, every silent examination was like being a bug under a microscope where her emotions were his for the taking.

Which, she reflected, they were.

There was no way she could hide the increased turmoil each day brought or the way her nerves frayed, bringing her to the end of her tether the closer they got to the end of the month.

Artoo beeped, drawing her attention to the plate he held extended her way and her lips twisted. Artoo the nursemaid; who'd have thought? Her stomach cramping, she still reached for a slice of the fruit he offered and nibbled on it. Vader's threat to tie her up and attach her to a nutrient drip was not longer foremost in her mind, but she *hated* to see Artoo so miserable when he failed to tempt her with a tasty morsel.

Over the last couple of days, since he'd started keeping her company around meal times, she'd come to look forward to it. No so much the food, but the sense of no longer being alone.

Vader had left her alone; save for a repeat of a scene on the couch where he'd woken her from a nightmare and she'd shunned his touch. It hadn't registered at the time, nor did it now, that he'd done little to antagonize her since their discussion about the japor. He'd left her to her own devices and sent Artoo to keep her company in his stead. He'd backed off, something she was aware of somewhere in the back of her mind, exhibiting Anakin-like signs of remorse that made her leery.

Signs that made her subconscious think he was planning something.

He'd not pushed for a resumption of their physical intimacies, or teased her, taunted her or... or much of anything, beyond trying to offer her comfort after a particularly violent nightmare, since that confrontation.

No.

Instead he'd given her something precious and dangerous all at once; breathing space.

And she hated it.

An almost hysterical laugh bubbled up from within her, a part of her *wishing* for the fighting that had kept her mind so preoccupied since her arrival. If he was going to keep her hostage, wasn't he responsible for her entertainment? She'd been asking him to leave her be since she'd arrived and now that he was giving her what she wanted and she felt ready to jump out of her skin.

Being alone meant thinking.

Feeling.

Remembering.

It meant time to reflect on her situation and the man who held her captive; it meant reliving moments from her recent past that were better forgotten. It meant temptation.

For it was in this moments as she struggled with her situation, as she reflected on where the twins might be, that she was tempted to reach for the oblivion of his kiss and touch. Would it really be so bad to lean on him? To share with him what she was thinking and feeling? Would it really be so bad to share her fears about the twins, to let him support her the way she instinctively knew he could?

Or would he let her fall and judge her for her weakness; ridicule her inability to move beyond the fact that her children were somewhere beyond the walls of the ship?

Still smarting over the confrontation about the japor, she failed to see what Vader had done since; that he was trying to make amends.

Instead all she could see was the jealous fury in his eyes, the way he'd accused her of despoiling the memory of what the japor had meant — to both of them. The way he'd believed she could take something so precious and profane it with something so sordid as an affair.

She closed her eyes, tilting her head forward to rest it against her knees.

Artoo made a mournful sound, his grasping arm reaching out to touch her shoulder and Padmé turned her head to look at him with tears swimming in her eyes. “I’m okay, Artoo,” she assured him, blinking back the moisture. Since he’d begun keeping her company, she’d eaten and drunk more than she had in a week. “I miss them.”

There was an inquiry, but Padmé was too drained from fighting her nightmares to bother looking at the translation and guessed. “The twins, yes. I wish I knew—” her voice caught, breaking, and she turned her face back to her knees. *Where are you, my precious children?* she wondered silently, acutely aware of how empty her arms, how empty her *life*, had felt since she’d woken from the coma. *Are you safe? Do Bail and Mon tell the truth about that at least?*

Artoo made another sound of sympathy before turning to leave her to her own devices; caught in her own thoughts, she didn’t hear him return to the kitchenette.

The beeping of his comlink drew Vader from the perusal of the latest ineffectual report from Cleek. Thus far there had been precious little news and it was frustrating to know his own search was proving more futile than Padmé’s. He had more resources, the resources of the Galactic Empire, at his fingertips, and not one viable lead in the near month since Padmé had been brought to him

Flipping on the comlink, he was surprised to hear Artoo’s electronic worry before he said a word in greeting. “Woah, Artoo, slow down.”

The beeping and blatting was a definite scold before the mournful wail he knew well sounded. Gritting his teeth, he sat back in his chair and turned towards the viewport. Alone in his office, he still had no desire to have someone walk in and see him speaking with his droid; especially about his wife! He couldn’t keep the frustration out of his tone when he replied to Artoo’s concern.

“I know, Artoo, that’s why I have you watching her. She won’t listen to me.”

Another series of beeps and whistles had Vader closing his eyes. His droid was apparently having no greater success with her than he was; though he did know Artoo had been able to get her to eat something on a semi-regular basis. That, if nothing else, was reassuring.

“Just do your best, Artoo; I’m hoping to have something to help distract her soon.” As if waiting for him to say it, the console behind him beeped. “Keep trying; you’re getting through to her better than I am at the moment. I’ll be by to see you both later.”

Shutting off the comlink, Vader weighed it in his hand, frustrated and irked that his droid was having better luck with his wife better than he was. He still smarted from their argument over the japor; still couldn’t bring himself to face Padmé for more than a few minutes at a time. Never, not in his wildest dreams, would he ever have thought she’d be able to make him feel this way about his behavior, but there was no escaping it. No denying it.

He was ashamed.

Ashamed and horrified by his callous treatment of her feelings about the japor despite the fact she refused to confide in him still. Perhaps, he'd acknowledged to himself in a rare moment of honesty, it was *because* of his treatment she couldn't trust him, and, at the moment, he couldn't blame her. He wouldn't trust him either after that last argument.

It forced him to think, to consider his actions and to plan. He hadn't been a General with an exemplary victory track record for nothing and with the revelation how his jealous behavior affected her, he was forced to consider options he never would have before. Not to mention actually *plan* the campaign to win his wife back the way he would a battle.

When he'd started looking for her, he'd never once imagined that she wouldn't *want* to be with him and had simply assumed she'd fall back into his arms. This last argument had forced him, more than any of their others, to reevaluate exactly how wrong he'd been in that assumption. It also forced him to analyze his actions, and her reactions to them, since her return.

What he came up with was a startling realization; he'd been right. The more he acted like Anakin, like the man she'd married when he'd been shielding her from his darker tendencies, the better Padmé responded. Frowning, he leaned back in his chair.

Erecting those walls, letting her see what she wanted to see, could be problematic; could—

The beeping of the console pierced his thoughts, drawing him from their depths, and he turned, stabbing the receive button. "What is it?"

"I have him, Master."

"Asajj."

There was a pause. *"Yes, Master. I'm on approach; where would you like me to bring him?"*

Not something he needed to think about; he'd been waiting for this call for days — since her last transmission. "The brig. I will meet you there."

A click of acknowledgment was followed by a hiss and then there was static before the comm. disconnected itself. Vader pushed away from the desk and strode out onto the bridge. Work didn't as much as hiccup, though the buzz seemed to die as he surveyed the scene. Damage control was under way, the subjugating of the world's population taking longer than he'd like. Perhaps with Asajj back, he would send her planet side to *encourage* their cooperation.

It was a task he'd normally have undertaken himself, especially in his current frame of mind, except he didn't dare be away from the ship for any length of time.

Sweeping from the bridge without a word, he followed the hallways, bypassing the lifts he would normally use and headed for a series of freight lifts that led straight from bridge down to the detention level. He wanted to waste no time in facing Asajj's prisoner.

He arrived before she did, dismissing the guards and shutting off the holo-recorders; he needed no witnesses to this meeting. Settling himself against the wall leading towards the detention cells, he crossed his arms over his chest and placed the sole of one booted foot flat

against the surface at his back. His pose was indolent, almost casual, but for the simmering of his emotions, the conflict in the back of his mind.

He knew what he wanted but after everything he'd accused Padmé of, after the hurt he'd inflicted, did he dare do what his pride demanded? Did he dare inflict that kind of wound on her now, after he'd already wounded her so deeply? Yet, she'd wounded him too just by the implication, the *confirmation* that she'd been unfaithful. Unlike him, she'd known all along he was alive — and willfully disregarded it.

The doors opened before he came to any kind of decision — though he heavily leaned towards 'yes'; Max had *dared* to touch his wife — and Asajj entered, dragging a cloaked figure behind her. It was almost prone, lying at an odd angle, and she tossed it with a solid *thud* to the ground in the center of the room. "As you requested, Master, he's been returned to you unharmed."

Returned.

Vader's eyes narrowed and Asajj, surprisingly, took a step back. She shot him a wary look that was almost masked by the arrogance in her stance. She knew better than to cross, or toy with, him and he had the feeling she was doing that right now.

Seeming to catch the message that she was playing with fire, Asajj stepped yet another pace away and lifted her hand, tugging the cowl of the robe back with the Force to reveal the golden face of the protocol droid that had been at Padmé's side since Vader's departure from Mustafar.

"You did request the droid, did you not?"

Threepio.

Vader straightened, his boot hitting the ground with a dull *thunk* as his gaze locked with Asajj's, his words even. It wasn't the prize he'd been expecting and Asajj knew it; had deliberate played to it. His lips thinned. "You didn't bring me the slicer."

Her shoulders straightened, her chin tilting at a haughty angle. "I nearly had him but he escaped. I was able to secure the droid in his place."

Somehow, Vader couldn't quite reconcile the faint relief he felt at not having to kill Max just yet with the discontent about the same. He chose instead to ignore it. His voice was smooth, controlled, and showcased his disappointment. "You let him get away."

"I was able to collect one or the other. I chose to bring you the droid, as you commanded, Master." He took a step towards her and she flinched. "Did I misunderstand you when you stated the droid was more important?"

Vader didn't continue closing the distance between himself and Asajj; having seen her squirm, he'd accomplished his goal. He stopped as he drew even with the prone and inactive Threepio. "The uprising on the planet has need of your brand of justice, Ventress," he completely changed the topic, knowing as he did that he threw her off balance. From the smell of her and the exhaustion long term space travel in small ship wrought, he knew he couldn't send her down immediately. He needed her rested, primed and battle ready. In other words, he needed her to be effective. "You join the men in six hours."

With a blink or two as she tried to follow his train of thought, Asajj finally crossed one arm over her chest and bowed. “As you wish, Master.”

She turned to leave.

“And Ventress.” Pausing on the threshold of the door, she looked back over her shoulder as he knelt, undoing the cloak about Threepio’s neck even as his blue eyes glittered with orange undertones, watching her. “Don’t disappoint me again.”

Making good her escape, she nodded sharply, once, and disappeared.

Vader dismissed her from his thoughts and turned his full attention to Threepio. Doing a quick, cursory examination of the droid showed that he appeared to be intact and Vader sat him up, flicking the switch at his neck that would bring him back online.

Crouched, he watched as the optical processors flickered. The protocol droid straightened as power surged through his systems, bringing them back into normal functioning parameters, and Vader waited impatiently as he seemed to take in the surroundings.

The head turned his way, and, unseen by anyone but the droid, Vader smiled briefly. “Threepio.”

“Master Anakin!” The delight in that tone was unmistakable. “How *good* to see you again!”

Helping the droid to his feet, Vader’s smile died. “I’m afraid I don’t go by Anakin anymore, Threepio. Lord Vader is more common.”

“Oh!” The droid sounded appalled at such a breach of etiquette and stuttered, struggling with an apology as quickly as he could. “My *deepest* apologies, sir. I did not mean, that is, I meant no offense.”

“None taken.” Examining the droid now that he was back on his feet, Vader frowned upon seeing a new slash of carbon scoring along one shoulder. He reached out to rub it only to discover it was older than it looked; Threepio had been struck by some kind of blaster bolt — and his protective covering had worked. “How’ve you been? Any damage I should know about?”

“Oh no, sir, Mistress Padmé has been *most* attentive to my maintenance.” The droid seemed to lose some of his enthusiasm. “At least, she was until she— Oh! I have *terrible* news, sir! I have failed in my mission to protect her as you instructed. I tried to go with her, sir, to reason with her about going alone with Lady Ventress, I really did, but Mistress Padmé would not be swayed and now she has disappeared!”

“She didn’t disappear, Threepio; I had Asajj bring her here. She’s with me.”

“Thank *heavens*! That is excellent news, sir!” The golden protocol droid brightened, straightening his shoulders. “May I assume that you are once again in need of my services?”

“You could say that,” with a shake of his head, Vader nodded to the cloak. “What’s with the disguise?”

“One of Sir Max’s less *brilliant* ideas; he accused , *me* of being conspicuous! Me!”

If the droid could have wrinkled his nose, Vader suspected he would have from the aggrieved disdain he put into his answer. As it was, it was the mention of Max's name that ensure he didn't laugh. "Imagine that. I'll have it burned."

"Oh *thank* you, sir! I knew *you* would understand."

This time Vader did chuckle; he felt better knowing he wasn't the only one who had a cause to loathe Max. He'd missed his first creation more than he'd realized. "That I do. Would you like to see your Mistress, Threepio?"

"Absolutely, sir."

"You can call me Lord Vader or Vader, Threepio."

"I would not *dream* of addressing you without a title, Lord Vader. It would be impolite and improper."

"Of course it would," wiping the grin from his lips, it still threatened as he led the droid from the brig area to the freight car he'd used to come down.

They climbed aboard and Vader selected the floor that would take them to his suite and Padmé, all the while debating what to tell the protocol droid. Too much and he'd be a nuisance, not enough and he'd make things worse. He decided on tact; Threepio would know the score soon enough.

"Padmé's been... melancholy since she arrived, Threepio. I'm hoping your presence helps cheer her up."

The droid sighed, if a droid could sigh, and looked at Vader with an almost sorrowful body language. "I am afraid she has not been the same since waking from her coma and being refused the information necessary to track down the twins, sir." Threepio brightened. "I say, *you were* aware you had become a father, were you not, Lord Vader?"

Bittersweet as it was, he nodded, his fist clenching. "I know."

"Then let me offer my congratulations! I am told that parenthood is a monumental step for humans, one in which you may impart your wisdom and experience to the next generation. It must be quite exciting! And while I realize the twins are not currently—"

"Threepio." He cut the droid off as the service elevator slowed to a stop, unable to handle the rambling optimism. It made him question the wisdom in bringing the droid here; would he just upset Padmé more? "That's enough."

"Sir?"

"Unless she speaks of the twins, don't mention them to her, all right? She's going through a tough time adjusting to being with me again; I don't want her upset unnecessarily."

"Very good, Lord Vader. I am *glad* to know that she is with you again. She was most distraught when she believed you to be dead."

His fist tightened fractionally more, the fabric of his glove pinching his flesh; distraught enough to turn to another man! Stepping off the lift, he led the way to his suite, nodding to the

Commander of Padmé's guard before punching in the code to open the door. He waved the droid in. "She'll be in the living room; makes yourself at home."

"Of course, sir," he shuffled inside. "I cannot thank you enough for—"

"Threepio?"

Both Vader and the droid turned at the sound of Padmé's voice. Her eyes were wide, deep bruises of dark color underneath them only making them seem larger. There was, however, no disguising the delight on her features despite the exhaustion.

"Oh! Mistress Padmé!"

Her eyes stayed on the droid for a long minute as he shuffled forward to greet her, before lifting — almost against her will — to the man standing in the doorway. Their gazes locked and Vader's hand tightened on the door frame. The urge, the *need*, to go to her and offer comfort and support was strong, but he knew she'd not yet accept it.

He nodded to her, offering a faint smile, and then turned and left, unable to deal with the joyful reunion that was about to occur; Artoo, he knew was still around and the droids would make Padmé smile in a way he'd been unable to since her return to him. She deserved a moment of happiness that wasn't tainted by his presence.

Padmé watched him go, shocked by the fact he'd simply dropped Threepio, smiled a tight smile, and disappeared. She was more than aware he hadn't seen Threepio for longer than he'd not seen her and it was almost unbelievable that he'd chosen to leave her this reunion alone.

Why?

The thought was immediate even as Threepio began to chatter. "Mistress, Padmé, I must say, you look as if no one has been feeding you. Have you no cook in this place?"

"I fend for myself, Threepio; you know I've always been able to," she returned quietly, not yet able to take her gaze off the main door. Would Vader come through his office? "Besides, Artoo has—"

"R2D2!" The protocol droid cut her off and she arched her eyebrows, finally turning her full attention to the droid only to have it snagged by a joyous melody as Artoo came trundling around the corner and spied his counterpart. "I have missed you my friend but why have you not been taking care of Mistress Padmé?"

Artoo said something that sounded distinctly rude and Padmé grinned unthinkingly. It had always been this way between the droids; insults and polite queries. It always served to lift her spirits even when she didn't want them lifted, especially now that they were back together after two years of separation.

Threepio shook his head and stepped forward to place one hand on top of the astromech's head. "You should know better my rotund friend. We will interface later and you can tell me everything I have missed with Master Ani—"

The casual slip made Padmé flinch almost as much as Threepio's hesitation and then correction.

“That is, Lord Vader, and I will tell you everything you have missed with Mistress Padmé.”

“Don’t let me stop you,” Padmé offered, waving them towards Vader’s office where she knew a charging station to be.

“But, Mistress Padmé; have you no need of my services?”

“Artoo’s already helped me with lunch, Threepio, and while I’m glad to see you, I was on my way to try and sleep.”

“Are you still not sleeping well, my Lady?”

Her responding smile was wan. “Some nights better than others. You know this time of year is tough for me.”

“Perhaps Lord Vader can—”

“No!” Padmé’s denial was instant and vehement — too vehement she realized when Threepio stared at her in what amounted to a stunned silence. “No, Threepio; just no, okay?” Without waiting to see what else the droid might say, Padmé turned on her heel and walked away, back to the living room view port.

Threepio looked to Artoo. “Was it something I said?”

Artoo toodled something with a mournful wail and then turned, obviously waiting for Threepio to follow him. The golden droid looked at Padmé and then followed the astromech, crossing the threshold into Vader’s office.

“Did Lord Vader and Mistress Padmé have a disagreement, Artoo?”

A rude noise was his answer.

“Well! There is no need for that kind of language; how was I supposed to know when I was left to languish without contact?”

Another series of beeps and whistles silenced the protocol droid and Padmé heard one last response before the door closed.

“Fighting? You must be mistaken; Master Anakin and Mistress Padmé rarely—”

Closing her eyes, she braced her hands on the viewport ledge as Threepio’s voice was cut off, only the occasional sound of Artoo’s muffled explanations penetrating the door to Vader’s office. The droid, however, was right; she and Anakin had almost never fought yet here she was, trapped by the man he’d chosen to become, and — aside from a couple of aberrations — that was all they did.

Thankfully.

Until their row over the japor.

Since then he’d barely said two words to her and those had been, she acknowledged reluctantly, only in consideration for her health. He’d tried to comfort her, tried to offer her support but hadn’t, she realized, been surprised when she’d rejected it. Something in his expression now seemed to *expect* her to reject him.

Maybe he was smarter than he'd been acting.

"—tress Padmé," the door to Vader's office opened and Threepio returned, speaking well before she could hear him. "I am *dreadfully* sorry if I caused any—"

"It's okay, Threepio," cutting him off, she swallowed the hard lump in the base of her throat. "You haven't been around; you don't know what's happened."

"Artoo was kind enough to inform me that you and Lord Vader have been having difficulties since your reunion. Might I be of assistance in clearing things up?"

His earnest desire to help made her try to smile and she pushed away from the viewport to face him. "How about making dinner, Threepio; Artoo tries, but he's not as adept in the kitchen."

"Why, I would be delighted to! Will Lord Vader be joining you?"

Her heart squeezed painfully at the address from Threepio and the cheerful, but careful, way in which it was uttered. Threepio didn't seem any more comfortable with his title than she did. And, honest as she was with herself, she couldn't bring herself to think of him as 'Vader' at the best of times; it was too... unnatural when they were face to face. "I doubt it, but make enough anyway. If nothing else, I can save it for tomorrow's breakfast."

"At once, my Lady! Come along, Artoo; you can show me where you keep everything so I might rearrange it to more convenient locations before I begin on dinner."

Padmé sighed as the two droids disappeared into the kitchenette, listening as the sound of pots and pans and other utensils and implements banged and crashed, drowning them out. As ever the protocol droid aimed to please and threw himself immediately into his new task. It buoyed her spirits to know that Artoo and Threepio were together again; counterparts reunited in a way that she and Anakin never would be.

Her almost-smile slipped from her lips and she prowled about the living room with a sudden restless energy.

Vader was keeping his distance and it made her edgy, wishing he'd simply show his hand as he had before. the lack of demands and expectations was unsettling; almost as much as the reason why she was there. This man, the one who'd withdrawn, was exhibiting Anakin-like signs of remorse; she almost expected him to bring her some kind of peace offering as he'd once used to.

She blinked, stopping as the sounds in the kitchen penetrated the fog of her thoughts.

Peace offering... Threepio?

Could he have had the droid for days and waited to give him to her now in an effort to soften her heart towards him? Despite what she knew of the darkness within him, she immediately doubted it and then doubted her own conclusion. He had it in him to be cruel, but would he punish his own creation while mad at her?

No; not mad.

That was wrong.

Her brow furrowing, her head spinning, Padmé stumbled back to the couch and shakily dropped into her sleeping nest. Everything was getting jumbled, twisted from this action. *Vader is not Anakin*, she reminded herself fiercely — except he was.

With a soft sound of despair, she curled forward and wrapped her arms about her middle as she drew her legs to her chest. On top of the emotional abyss that was the loss of her children, the emotional turmoil of Vader's — Anakin's? — sudden change in tactics was unwanted and enough to overload her already taxed system.

Unable to cope, she closed her eyes as unnoticed tears trickled from the corner of her eyes, and drifted into oblivion.

Month Twenty Four, Day 27 PEF

Chapter 63

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Twenty Seven PEF

early morning

"Very good, Commander," Vader nodded to the young man, more recognition than most received. "Has Ventress reached the surface?"

"An hour ago, my Lord," the Commander reported with a smart salute. "The progress reports indicate she's crushed three cells of resistance and is currently pressing a counter attack on the rebels who've tried to retake the capital."

"Excellent." Asajj was proving to be as effective as he'd hoped she'd be. "What—" His personal comlink beeped, cutting him off, and Vader frowned. Plucking it from his belt he checked the frequency and found it to be that of Padmé's guards. Waving away the officer, he headed to the viewport and flicked it on. "Yes, Commander?"

"Sorry to disturb you, Lord Vader; the droid said it was urgent."

The droid... Threepio? A frown crossed his lips. "Urgent how?"

"The Lady Vader, sir; according to the droid she failed to wake for dinner and now she's in some kind of violent distress—"

"Call the medical droid but don't approach her until I arrive; I'm on my way." Flicking the comlink off, Vader strode from the deck at the fast clip, worry for Padmé's well being already swirling at the forefront of his thoughts. Ignoring the looks of the men on the bridge, he headed for the turbo lift that would take him down to the level with his suite.

After her collapse a week ago she seemed to be eating and sleeping, more than she had been, but he knew she was far from healthy. Images of a relapse popped into his mind, of a complete collapse the droids would be able to do little to control or fix; images of her pale face as she struggled to hang on to a life he knew she wanted.

Images of her funeral popped into his mind as he slapped the controls to the lift. It arrived almost immediately and he stepped in, silently urging it to hurry. Seeming to take forever, he was counting backwards from one hundred when it finally opened on his floor. Breaking into a dead run, he sprinted for his quarters, going straight through the open door just as the medical droid arrived.

Barreling past it, he skidded to a stop, looking from the protocol droid, who appeared to be wringing and waving his hands in agitation, to the Commander of Padmé's guard. "How is she?"

Even as he spoke the words, sensations and feelings bombarded him. Agony, anguish and desperation; Padmé let out an anguished moan from somewhere in the sitting room. Her breath caught and he heard her sob, pleading with someone — and he knew who. His heart clenched painfully as he realized she was in the throes of another nightmare.

“Out,” Vader order immediately, pointing to the door. The clone saluted and complied immediately as Vader turned on Threepio, anger swimming under the concern that was almost all enveloping. Padmé wouldn’t have wanted anyone to witness her distress. “Threepio?”

“She is in quite an abnormal amount of distress, sir,” the droid reported with a note of panic in his voice. “I have tried to wake her but nothing I have done appears to penetrate whatever holds her in thrall.”

“She’s having a nightmare, Threepio,” Vader told the droid bluntly, tiredly, glancing back at the door, his words unnecessarily harsh. Part of him wished he hadn’t been called for he could already see the outcome of this encounter. He’d wake her, offer comfort — which she would might or might not accept initially — until she realized she was in his arms and then push him away.

Rejection after rejection, he’d been trying to support her; would this time prove any different? Padmé’s anguished cry from the sofa spurred him into action; it didn’t matter. Whatever she chose to do with his offer, he couldn’t let her continue to be subjected by the nightmare, or the aftermath he knew would swallow her if she woke on her own, when he knew he could stop it.

Striding to the couch, he was barely aware of Threepio on his heels, sprouting platitudes.

“My apologies, Lord Vader, I truly did not mean to make such a mistake, but Mistress Padmé seemed to be so upset I could not have *possibly* left her. I knew I had to do something and you have ever cared for her, Master Ani.”

And so he had.

“It’s okay, Threepio.” Mostly ignoring the droid, Vader settled on the edge of the sofa as Padmé thrashed back and forth, deeply enmeshed in the world that was her nightmare. Threepio continued to drone on, but his attention was focused solely on his wife as she cried out in her sleep.

“No... NO! *Please...*”

His gut twisted as her hand reached out to the invisible abductor, palm open and beseeching. Taking her hand, he folded it within his own and tucked it against his chest as he leaned in, brushing his fingers over her face as he did. “Padmé.”

“Please... Luke... Leia!”

“*Padmé!* Sliding his hand along her jaw, he stroked her cheek with his thumb, adding a Force suggestion to his words.” Wake up, Padmé,’ he urged softly. “You’re dreaming.”

She seemed to freeze, her fingers tangling in his shirt as her hand flexed around his, her grip suddenly punishing as she clung to him without realizing it. Her breath left her in a gasp as her eyes flew open, her head jerking to the side to dislodge his touch. Vader withdrew it,

shifting his grip to the edge of the sofa instead in the event she thrashed and tried to throw herself off.

Cloudy and unfocused, her eyes met his, and Vader knew she wasn't really seeing him, she as still caught somewhere in her memories.

"Padmé."

She blinked, squinting at him before her gaze switched to Threepio, her nails biting into the flesh of his chest; a wound he ignored as she looked beyond Threepio, to the room, back to him and around, desperation mounting with each circuit. She swallowed hard, her emotions like a washboard to Vader's equilibrium. Her hand in his telegraphed the sense of utter desolation, the way nothing else thus far had, as she came out of her nightmare state.

His eyes burned as he struggled with the impact of her sorrow; an impact he couldn't let her see. Keeping his voice soothing, he squeezed her hand and lifted the one from the side of the couch towards her face once more. "Padmé."

She'd been in the process of looking about once more and her head snapped around for her gaze to clash with his. The look in her eyes faded, her eyes clearing as she jerked away from his touch as his finger tips brushed her cheek.

"You were having a nightmare again," he offered by way of explanation, "I—"

"Don't touch me!"

Her shrill demand was nothing like the forceful convictions she'd once issued as she reared away from his hand. Kicking out, she dislodged him from the side of the sofa, making him stagger to regain his balance. The hand against his chest slipped from his fingers as he was forced to stand or fall, one hand on the coffee table for balance.

Almost as if in a panic, Padmé shot from the sofa, holding her hands up to ward him off as she backed away. "Don't touch me," she stated again, though he'd made no move to do so again. "I don't need your help; I don't *want* your help!"

Clenching his hands at his sides, Vader watched helplessly as she stumbled away, putting her back to him before making an obvious retreat to the 'fresher. She was shaking; he could see it from where he stood, her knees less than steady.

"Padmé—"

"Just leave me alone!"

His heart clenched as she disappeared inside the 'fresher, the door no barrier to the desperation and despondency he could feel pouring from her, not aided by the confusion his attempt to help had added. Frustrated, he clenched his jaw and rubbed his hands over his face, wishing she'd turn to him just *once*, much as she had the first time he'd been mistaken for—

He heard her sob, just once, moments before the sound of the shower started and knew she was fighting for composure. Turning on his heel, he struggled to block the emotional bombardment Padmé couldn't control. He needed to get out, to get away, or he risked doing something even more ill-advised than trying to comfort her. Something neither of them would thank him for later. Like forcing the 'fresher door open and joining her in the shower.

Exhaling softly, Vader knew the tension within him wasn't going to dissipate any time soon without help and headed for the door. Striding through it, he stopped briefly to speak with the Commander and the hovering medical droid. "Dismiss the medical droid; false alarm."

"Yes, Lord Vader."

Continuing on his way, he headed for the training salle, unaware he had a shadow until the golden protocol droid spoke up from behind him.

"Might I have a word with you, sir?"

Threepio. Vader sighed inwardly; he'd forgotten the protocol droid's presence. Slowing his angry strides to allow the droid to catch up, he turned one eye on him. "What's on your mind, Threepio?"

The droid was uncharacteristically silent as Vader led them around the corner and down another hallway. He stopped, punching in the code and motioned the droid to enter first. Threepio, surprisingly, waited until the door was closed before speaking; a habit learned from working covertly with Padmé no doubt.

"I would like to offer my apologies, Lord Vader," the droid finally offered stiffly, "for I surely did not mean to upset you or Mistress Padmé, but I did not know what else to do."

"It's okay, Threepio; I understand."

"I am glad that you do, Lord Vader, for I do not. I would have thought Mistress Padmé would be delighted by your company once more."

"It's complicated," an understatement perhaps, but one that wouldn't have the droid asking questions. "Padmé's not overly thrilled with some of the things I've done."

"Oh, I am *well* aware of that, sir. Mistress Padmé has made no secret of the fact she did not approve of your course whenever she was planning raids on Imperial facilities. In fact, I found it most confounding that she reacted so negatively whenever I would remind her that it was my job to look after her well being. It was, after all, the very last order that you gave me."

Vader's eyebrows rose through Threepio's speech as the droid confirmed what he had suspected before, and then chuckled at the last. "Thanks, Threepio; I knew I could count on you."

"But you could not, sir." The droid lamented. "I tried my best to stabilize her after the unfortunate business on Mustafar, but there was nothing I could do when she slipped into her coma. My poor mistress!"

"It's not your fault; you're not programmed for medical situations. I know you did your best. You always do."

"Oh thank you sir!" Threepio sounded delighted. "It is so good to know that you appreciate my efforts on your behalf; Mistress Padmé has repeatedly asked me to ignore your last directive. As if I could do that!"

The droid's indignant tone sparked another chuckle, Vader relaxing fraction by fraction as he realized that he wasn't the only one his wife had been giving a hard time. He let the droid speak, not interrupting him, the discussion almost as good as a work out.

"I am confused, though sir; I am afraid I do not understand why she denies herself your support when she never has with Sir Max."

His whole body stiffened at the sound *that* name, whatever good Threepio's comments having done being completely undone as Vader snapped to attention, glaring at the droid. "And just *what* is that supposed to mean, Threepio?"

The droid seemed oblivious to Vader's mood and reported in the same perplexed tone as before. "I would often find Mistress Padmé in a similar state as earlier and, seeing as how she had few friends and you were not there, sir, I would find Sir Max. Since I have never been able to wake her, Sir Max would. She was so distraught, much as she was just now, that he would offer her comfort."

"Comfort." The word was controlled, near explosively so, as Vader reached for the wall and wrapped his fingers around one of the struts. He didn't notice as his fingers dug in, bending the durasteel and leaving finger imprints. "What the *hell* do you mean by 'comfort'?"

Threepio suddenly seemed to realize the anger in Vader's voice and took a step back. "Nothing, sir."

"Answer the question, Threepio."

"Well sir," the droid seemed reluctant, but answered anyway, as he was programmed to do, "he would sometimes hold her in his arms and let her cry, though I find it most distressing that she did not object to this as she did with you. Other times he would pick her up and carry her away, as if she could not continue to be where she was."

"Stop."

But the droid didn't, not seeming to have heard the pained command. "More often than not, sir, because she was often in her office working when these episodes would occur, he would simply shut and lock the door without so much as a by your leave! I say, he was *most* presum—"

"That's *enough*!"

Threepio finally fell silent.

"I've heard enough," the words were controlled, barely, and Vader knew he was vibrating. The pain Threepio's honesty had wrought was more than enough to drive him to his knees — if his fingers hadn't been embedded in the durasteel cross beam.

He shouldn't have asked; he'd known better than to ask.

Known what he was inviting when he'd voiced the question, but he'd needed to know the truth and Threepio, as always, had been brutally honest. Without saying the words, he'd just confirmed what Padmé had boldly proclaimed; that she and Max had shared a sexual relationship — why else would they exile the droid and lock the doors? It hurt like hell to have it confirmed; like losing his arm all over again, but worse.

This pain was self inflicted; Padmé had told him but a part of him hadn't believed her. No. He'd needed it *confirmed*. Needed it so badly he'd known it would be like having his heart torn out to hear the details even as he'd been unable to stop himself from asking the questions.

Despite the situation between he and Padmé, the fleeting indecision that had occurred when Threepio had been brought in and Vader thought him to be Max, disappeared completely.

Anger settled over the pain, jealousy and rage twisting in his gut and ready to explode outwards in a deadly conflagration of destruction. He needed to destroy something, to give it free reign as it grew and mutated, threatening to consume him.

Except that Threepio was still in the room and a part of him couldn't yet expose his oldest creation to what he was about to do with the droid compliment in the training salle.

"Thank you, Threepio," he managed, his voice stilted, unaware that his eyes had shifted from their normal blue to a pulsing, flashing yellow. "Find a clone and have him escort you back to Padmé."

"Very good, sir."

Threepio departed and the door slid shut behind him.

Anger.

Hatred.

Jealousy.

The emotions roiled through him, the Darkside of the Force crawling through his veins like creatures across a picnic blanket looking for substance; except he was the meal. His agony over the betrayal of his wife; the pain over the realization that she still preferred the comfort of another man over his own — all of it fueled the need for destruction. An immediate need that couldn't be subjugated until later; a need that had to be met *now*.

Vader extracted his hand from the beam and strode across the room to the console that would call up the droids he intended to use for practice. Punching in the code with vicious jabs of his finger, he set the mode for the hardest work out possible. No stun weapons; no pulled punches. These droids would have the same chance to kill him that he had at them.

Except he would win.

He would win because each of them would be wearing the indistinct face of a man he'd never met; a man who had *dared* touch what was his. A man who would be dead the moment Vader found him, his life already forfeit, for Asajj *would* bring him Max. She *would* capture him alive no matter what it cost her; Vader wouldn't allow any other outcome.

He *would* have his satisfaction!

Shrugging out of his cloak, he tossed it aside and waited for the program to kick in, his hands as far from his lightsaber as they could get. The whirl of the droids as they were deployed, the click of the joints locking into place and finally the familiar sound of weapons being deployed echoed within the room.

The Darkside pulsed through his veins and, mere milliseconds before the first of the ranged droids would have depressed their firing pins, he turned, extending his hands and sending a devastating wave of Force energy into the mass. They flew backwards, slamming into the wall with enough force to break limbs and destroy processors.

Vader didn't so much as pause as the Force wave left his hands, the very droids he'd once fought against when Grievous was in command, now the opponents before him. Whirling staffs of deadly energy, the four former bodyguards encircled the Sith, lashing out with strikes so swift the eye couldn't follow.

Parrying the first three strikes as his lightsaber flared into life, Vader kicked out above the last, using his final parry for leverage. The lightning quick kick slammed into the head of the droid with the full power of the Darkside behind it, crushing it like a tin can and, as his other foot came up to follow, knocking it clear.

The body continued to fight, the staff slamming back in a lucky blow as he landed, pain arcing through his body as the energy weapon delivered a near lethal charge. He reacted without thinking, rolling away from the contact even as he swept his lightsaber up behind him.

It dropped, three precise strikes ending its mobility and the connection between its parts.

A blow landed across his shoulders as he rolled to his feet, lightsaber at the ready, accepting the hit as he came back with one of his own. His artificial hand snapped wide, intercepting a blow he couldn't see, and he rolled his wrist to grasp the staff weapon as he parried the other two. With a mighty, Force assisted heave, he hauled the one he couldn't see around and over, slamming it into the other two.

It jerked, the processors overloading as it slammed down on the two energy pikes but Vader was already in motion, sending his lightsaber out wide, it flew across the room at the two battle droids that hadn't been destroyed by his Force push, the blade spinning with deadly precision as it cleaved through one and then the other before arcing back towards his hand.

He flipped, deftly avoiding the energy pike of one of the droids as it came back in, catching his blade by the handle in mid air and coming down swinging.

The familiar sound of rolling tanks penetrated his mind and he realized that two of the droidekas he'd never used, but saved for something like this, had entered the fracas. Immersing himself in the Darkside, he let out a yell that was as much primal rage as pain as he dove into the hand to hand combat with a single minded intensity.

"Mine!"

He accepted a blow to the shoulder that should have hurt, another glancing one to the face that had him tasting blood, but returned with a three strike series of blows that destroyed one droid before bringing him into the reach of the other. Ducking under the last staff, he brought his lightsaber up with a mighty heave.

The blade caught momentarily on the armor of the droid before slicing easily upwards. The droid let out a mechanical equivalent of a squeal, a sound that brought a maniacal, hard smile to Vader's lips. "You can't have her," he stated coldly, seeing Max in his mind's eye as he cleaved the droid in two and kicked away the staff. "She's *mine*."

It skittered away even as he threw himself into a back flip, deftly avoiding the first barrage of the droideka's blasters. He dropped between them, parrying the bolts as he spun in a circle before unexpectedly dropping to the ground. The blasters lit up the shields of each and Vader rolled, calling on the Force again.

A sound he'd never heard them make filled the room as they were suddenly lifted into the air, slamming into the ceiling with crushing force. Their shields flickered and wavered as they struggled to maintain their defenses under the onslaught.

Smarter than the average droid, they turned within those protective bubble, angling their blasters downwards. Vader accepted the first hit, feeling the sting of the blaster bolt as it slid across his bicep. The Force at his finger tips, he accepted the next hit, absorbing the energy, the droidekas battering him with hit after hit until he let loose another barrage of Force energy, this one fueled in part by the energy of the weapon's fire he'd absorbed.

"I will *kill* you!"

The shields flickered and died, the sound of metal twisting and grinding, screaming as he pressed them into the super structure only to slam together with a giant metal *clang* as he brought his hands together.

Destroyed and now little more than a compressed pile of junk, Vader let them fall with a resounding crash to the floor. Breathing heavily, his skin slick with sweat, he lifted one arm to wipe his forehead and looked around for another challenger.

Except there wasn't one.

His eyes continued to gleam yellow, nearly orange, as they pulsed with the intensity of his hatred, his focus still on the man who had dared touch his wife. The workout hadn't helped as much as planned. In his mind's eye he could see the scenes that Threepio had described; his wife held in the arms of another man. His *wife* turning her face to another's as a door closed, the *sound* of the lock almost more torturous than the knowledge of what would be occurring beyond that portal.

Letting loose a curse, he flung his lightsaber away and let loose a barrage of Force lightning at the twisted metal hunks of what remained of the droids. They arced and spat, the electricity climbing across the metal with an intensity that never matched its human counter parts — but even that wasn't enough.

Padmé would remember why she belonged with him; he would *make* her remember.

The thought was a fleeting one, for he didn't blame his wife; he blamed Max. Max; the man who had dared touch a woman who wasn't his. Max; the man who had dared touch the woman who belonged to Vader. Max; the man who would be dead as soon as Asajj tracked him down and brought him Vader for justice.

Max's days, Vader vowed silently as he caught his breath and called his lightsaber back to his hand, were numbered.

Month Twenty Four, Day 29 PEF

Chapter 64

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Twenty Nine PEF

Not trusting himself to face his wife, or Threepio, Vader didn't return to their suite after his workout in the training salle; he knew himself well enough to know he'd try and instigate another argument. If he did, he suspected he'd hurt Padmé worse than he already had and, even in his rage, he had no interest in making things harder than they were for her. She was dealing with enough with the loss of the twins and their continued absence; he had promised himself he wasn't going to add to her burden.

It wasn't until two days later that he returned, confident he could speak to her more like his old self than who he was now, only to find Threepio fussing over her lunch. Realizing that, with her back to him, she hadn't yet seen him, Vader put his shoulder into the door jamb and watched the byplay.

"You really must eat more than a few bites, Mistress Padmé," scolded the protocol droid. "The recipe is a new one I found in the database and I believe it would be most agreeable to your palate."

"I appreciate the effort, Threepio, but I'm just not hungry."

Unable to keep silent, Vader chuckled softly as her stomach growled, contradicting that statement; the sound of his laugh brought her spinning around to face him, eyes wide for a moment before turning wary. He ignored that look and instead took in her appearance.

She was still thin, her clothing hanging off her body, but there was color in her cheeks even though the shadows under her eyes were more pronounced. "You really shouldn't lie, Padmé; it'd be a shame to waste Threepio's talents."

"I *beg* your pardon, sir," the droid stated stiffly, offended. "But I am a protocol droid as you very well know, not a personal chef!"

Vader's grin was swift and boyish, *natural* and Padmé responded to it as if by instinct; she returned it for a heart stopping second, sharing in the mirth that was Threepio, before sucking in a sharp breath and turning her back on him. His grin disappeared almost instantly.

"You make a fine chef, Threepio," Padmé offered soothingly despite her stiff posture. "It's better to have many talents instead of just one anyway; you never know when protocol might call for a translator to cook for their guests."

"There are twenty seven cultures on record in my databanks who require it as a sign of respect, my Lady," he offered in swift reply. "We have had the fortunate luck to avoid them for now."

“And for the future, Threepio,” Vader assured him. “We’re not going anywhere for the moment.”

“Has the ship been damaged, sir?”

“Unfinished business,” he refused to say more with Padmé in the room; she wouldn’t likely approve of the subjugation of the Toydarian world and, in an effort to remind her of the man she’d always seen him to be, wasn’t about to enlighten her. “Is there enough for another bowl?”

“Of course, sir!” The delight in the droid’s tone was unmistakable. “I ever endeavor to ensure there is enough for you as well as Mistress Padmé. I have so been hoping you would be joining us.”

Padmé stiffened, making to push her bowl away, but Vader reached her, blocking her in with his body and covered her hand with his. Her gaze flew to his, her emotional turmoil evident in her gaze. He ignored it. “You’re hungry; eat.”

“I find my appetite has fled.”

“Then keep me company,” he pitched his voice low, glancing at Threepio. “It would be a shame to waste all his hard work. You wouldn’t want to hurt his feelings, would you?”

Tugging on her hand, Padmé glared at him and Vader reluctantly let her go, wishing she wouldn’t fight him so much. The space he’d given her hadn’t mellowed her shell, but he could see that it was making her think and thinking, he’d realized, was a weakness of hers. Perhaps if she thought enough, despite her conclusions as to his actions, she’d see that he wasn’t trying to make things harder for her; that he was simply trying to be there for her.

As he stepped back and slid onto the stool across from her, she picked up her spoon and dipped it into her bowl again, playing with the shapes and letters within the broth. Threepio brought Vader a bowl and spoon and he thanked the droid before turning his attention to the concoction. It had been a while since he’d had anyone cook for him, especially with Threepio’s level of skill, and he inhaled the aroma with a grin.

“It smells delicious, Threepio.”

“Thank you, Lord Vader,” replied the droid delightedly. “I do hope it tastes as good as it smells.”

He chuckled, glancing at Padmé, and took a bite. The flavors burst across his tongue as he chewed and then swallowed, his tongue darting out to catch a drop at the corner of his mouth. He noted that Padmé’s gaze narrowed at the action, but tucked his spoon back into the bowl. “Every bit. Don’t you agree, my love?” She flinched, looking away and Vader saw the hand holding her spoon tighten, the knuckles going white. He forged ahead, determined to draw her into conversation even if it was something mundane. “Padmé? How’s the soup?”

“Fine.”

“Just fine?” He took another mouthful. “I think the chef in the mess could learn a pointer or two from Threepio, don’t you?”

“I’ve never eaten in the mess,” she retorted stiffly, as if he needed a reminder as to why. “Commander Grange would better be able to answer that than I.”

Silence descended between them for a long minute as Vader continued to eat, his eyes on his wife as she looked everywhere but at him. Finally, he reached over and grasped the hand that still held her spoon and stopped it from circling the bowl again. It brought her gaze back to his.

“Eat. Threepio went to a lot of trouble for you.”

“Don’t you mean for *you*?” she hissed, glancing at the back of the droid who was talking softly to himself by the counter as he did something she couldn’t see.

“No; neither of you knew I’d be in today. Eat; you need to keep your strength up if you’re going to keep fighting me.”

Eyes blazing, she tugged her hand free and Vader let her, digging into his meal. A couple of minutes later, Padmé did the same, lifting the spoon almost reluctantly to her lips. He kept his gaze on his bowl, knowing that if he commented on it, she’d stop just to spite him and he couldn’t risk it. Any nutrients she was able to get into her system were a bonus; she’d need them, as he said, for the strength to argue with him not to mention attempt another escape.

After the disastrous end of her last one, he wasn’t fool enough to think she’d given up on the idea. She was simply biding her time. He smiled faintly, but covered it by picking up his bowl and tipping it back to sip the last of the broth. He’d rather have Padmé blazing at him and fighting mad than the wraith she was slowly becoming. The run down woman before him was nearly at her wits end and it hurt to see her that way. Hopefully she’d rally before he was forced to take drastic measures.

Placing the bowl back on the table, he pushed to his feet. He hadn’t had soup in some time and Threepio, for a droid, had a good way with flavors. “Delicious, Threepio. See that she has a second bowl, won’t you?”

Not waiting for anyone’s reply, he strode from the room and headed for the door to return to his duties. It had been a brief visit, but one that convinced him he was well able to deal with his wife without losing his temper; able to act like the man she’d always seen him to be in her presence. Perhaps it was time to return to her sphere of influence and set in motion the next step of his plans.

It certainly couldn’t hurt.

Alderaan — Month Twenty Four, Day Twenty Nine PEF

Late morning

The buzzing of the intercom drew him from the document on his screen and his hand flashed out automatically to press the receive button without looking away from the dry contents. An interruption, *any* interruption, would be welcome. “Yes, Midge?”

“A person named Maxwell to see you, Senator.”

Bail Organa raised his eyebrows as turned his attention to the comm. unit, flicking the switch that would allow him to view his visitor, his eyebrows nearly hit his hairline as he observed the man who’d been in Padmé’s company when he’d last seen him. “Send him in.”

“He is not on your agenda, sir.”

“Then make room..”

“Yes, sir.”

Spinning in his chair, Bail rose to his feet and crossed the room to open the door leading to his private office. At home on Alderaan, he considered the timing of this visit as Mon Mothma was due to arrive so they could discuss the next motion being presented to the puppet senate. The door standing open, he returned to his desk and called up the bill he was supposed to be perusing that morning even as his thoughts turned to his visitor.

Max had left the Alliance at Padmé’s request, apparently having offered him something that they couldn’t provide. What, Bail didn’t know, but he *did* know the two of them had been kindred spirits in many ways even before they’d met and split from the fledgling Alliance movement. Perhaps that was why Max had been so susceptible to her persuasions.

“Senator Organa.”

Looking up from the bill he wasn’t reading anyway, Bail smiled at his visitor. “Max. It’s good to see you again.”

“I guess,” agreed the slicer, glancing around the room. “I wish it were under better circumstances.”

“Oh? What brings you to Alderaan?” Seeing that Max was alone, without a petite dark hair shadow that usually accompanied him, Bail frowned, looking beyond to the empty corridor. “Isn’t Padmé with you?”

The slicer’s gaze sharpened on Bail, narrowing, as if searching for some kind of trick.

Interesting.

Bail was going to take that reaction as a negative one and breathed a little easier. Breha had their daughter — Padmé’s Leia — for the morning but if they chose to surprise him in his office as they often did, things would have gotten awkward. Fortunately, the friction between he and Padmé had led to her being disinclined to visit. He regretted the rift, but at the same time blessed it; Leia wouldn’t have been safe without it.

“I’ll take that as a no. Has something happened?”

“Damn straight something’s happened; she’s missing!”

Knocked back by the vehement statement, Bail straightened in his chair. “Missing. What happened? *When* did it happen?”

“A month ago today,” Max stated curtly, sliding one hand over his head to pull his bangs out of his face. “Asajj took her to a meeting with some contact of hers and she never returned.”

He wasn’t telling the whole truth; Bail could see it in the way Max wouldn’t meet his gaze. For a man who spent his life breaking into things he shouldn’t, Max was a lousy liar. “There’s more than you’re telling.”

“That’s the important part, Bail,” he bit out in reply, starting to pace around the office. “Padmé’s missing and I’ve tried to find her and I can’t. I’ve tried everything I can think of, every lead, every whisper... I...” he hesitated and then seemed to deflate. His reluctance couldn’t have been more obvious when his expression turned bleak. “I need your help.”

The buzzer sounded on his desk and Bail glanced down. “One second Max; yes?”

“*My apologies for the interruption, Senator, but Mon Mothma is here, as scheduled, to see you. Shall I have her wait?*”

Perfect timing — as always.

“No; send her in. This meeting involves her too.” He clicked off the comm.

“Mon Mothma?”

“She’ll want to hear what you have to say, Max. Maybe together we can come up with a solution.”

Obviously frustrated, Max returned to pacing, his gaze darting about the office. It caught on the images of his family, but Bail, despite the jump in his stomach, betrayed no outwards emotion; he didn’t dare — though he did exhale of a soft sigh of relief when Max turned his attention away to another part of the office without a sign of recognition.

Leia, fortunately, appeared slightly chubby in those pictures and didn’t yet favor Padmé the way Bail suspected she would one day. His daughter was a cherub, her features easy to pass off as a mix between Breha’s and his own at a glance. Only someone who knew Padmé as well, as *intimately*, as Max did stood a chance of recognizing Leia’s true parentage.

It took a minute for Mon Mothma to arrive and she paused on the threshold when she saw that Bail already had a visitor. “Am I intruding?”

“Come in Mon and close the door; you remember Max?” Bail invited. “Max, take a seat.”

“How can you sit at a time like this?” demanded the slicer, his frustration and worry exploding into an accusation. “Padmé’s *missing* and you want to *talk* about it!”

“Padmé is missing?” Mon sounded genuinely alarmed, her gaze flying to Bail’s before deliberately glancing at the holo of Leia and he on one corner. Bail nodded fractionally, following her line of thought; if Padmé had disappeared, Vader had likely found her. It was their worst fears come to fruition. “Since when, Maxwell?”

“A month ago — thirty days today, and tomorrow is Empire Day.”

Again, Bail and Mon exchanged looks. They knew the significance of what he implied. Bail was the first to speak, pretending ignorance. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Empire Day; the day her kids were born? The day she slipped into a coma and *you* stole her children because she wasn’t conscious to fight for them? The *worst* day of the year for her?” Derision entered Max’s tone. “You really are a cold fish like she said, aren’t you Bail?”

“I’m afraid I was a little overwhelmed by the birth of my own daughter at the time,” Bail returned dryly. “But I appreciate the reminder; it wouldn’t do to forget the birthday of my little princess.”

"I don't get you, Organa; you're a father with a daughter of his own," Max spat, the words an accusation. "How can you keep her from her kids? How can you sleep at night knowing that could have been you?"

If only Max knew.

Bail shook his head, his tone hardening. "We're not here to discuss the fact that Padmé's children were hidden for their own protection; we're here to talk about Padmé's disappearance. Tell us what you can about it; what happened exactly?"

"And if I do, you'll help me find her?"

"If we know the details, we *might* be able to help," Mon tempered. "The search may prove to be beyond our resources."

Bail watched as Max struggled with the knowledge and then, as he must, gave in to the inevitable. Without their help, he'd likely never find Padmé and if she was where Bail suspected she was and who she would be with, they might even save the slicer's life in the bargain.

"Asajj was working with us towards this new target, supplying information and surprisingly accurate schematics. Her contact agreed to meet with Padmé." He slid into one of the chairs and slouched, looking at his disreputable boots. "So Asajj agreed to bring her to the meeting; said they wouldn't see her if Asajj wasn't present. Which makes sense; we'd done meetings like that before and they've gone off without a hitch. Except that neither Padmé, nor Asajj, came back from it."

"And you've seen neither of them since?"

"Asajj about a week ago; she collected Padmé's annoying droid and warned me to lay low — to disappear. But I can't just abandon her; Padmé's not as strong as she looks and she needs every friend she can get."

Bail and Mon shared another look and then Mon slowly shook her head. "I am sorry, Maxwell, but we do not have the resources to undertake a search and rescue mission for a woman who has disregarded and scorned our cause since abandoning it."

"I thought you were supposed to be her friends!"

"I still consider myself one," Bail assured him, "but Mon is right. Even if Padmé were a member of our organization, we don't have the resources to allocate to this; no one has the skills to track an ex-assassin Force adept who doesn't want to be found."

"I could track her if I had the resources."

"Then come back and work for us," Mon urged. "You can use anything, *anyone* you need, if you do."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I am afraid we cannot help you."

Exploding from the chair, Max rounded on them. "How can you put a condition on Padmé's well being? How can either of you sit there so calmly when who knows what is

happening to her? How is it you have a clear conscience to barter and scheme for what you really want?"

Mon settled back, watching him with a cool gaze. "Padmé is missing, Maxwell; you may never see her again. Come back to work for the Alliance; it may be your best chance to find her."

"The Hell I will! I don't know why I thought either of you would help when you've done nothing but road block her since she turned your offer down!"

"Max—"

"No," turning towards the door, he shook his head. "Forget it, Bail. I knew before why Padmé left and now you're just showing me for yourself. I'll find her on my own!"

Bail and Mon watched as the slicer stormed from the room, disappearing down the corridor. On the heels of his angry shout, the patter of little feet sounded on stone and a dark haired mopet with twin brown braids came flying into Bail's office. Her impish face was a mask of concern that cleared upon seeing him.

"Daddy!"

"Leia!" he stood just as she flung herself at him, her tiny arms wrapping tightly about his neck as he wrapped her in a secure embrace. "I thought you and your mother were in the gardens this morning."

"Silly daddy," she returned with a giggle as he tickled her stomach. "It's lunch time!"

"Why... so it is. Join us Mon?"

"I would be delighted — and how are you, Princess Organa?"

She giggled again with an almost fully toothed smile as Bail put her back on the ground. "I'm good! It's chocolate pudding day!"

"Then I will certainly be joining you," Mon told her with a solemn expression even as her eyes twinkled. "For it is a little known fact that chocolate pudding is a weakness of mine. How clever of you to discover it, Princess."

Leia laughed, squirming and grabbed Bail's hand before tugging him towards the door. She paused, looking up with innocent eyes as they reached the threshold, her brow puckering as she remembered something. "Daddy?"

"Yes, sweetheart."

"Who was that angry man?"

Bail's smile faded as he looked down the corridor that Max had traversed just moments before Leia's appearance. If he'd stayed but a minute longer would he have been able to recognize Padmé's daughter, jeopardizing everything they'd worked so hard to achieve?

Shaking his head to dismiss the thought, he crouched to look Leia in the eye. "He's worried about an old friend of mine, sweetie," he told her honestly. "She's missing and he's worried about her."

“Oh.” she appeared to take a minute to digest that fact. “Are you?”

He managed a smile for her. “I am, but I think I know where she is.”

“Did you say so, Daddy?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because if he knew, darling girl, he’d get hurt and I don’t want to see him hurt; would you?”

She cocked her head and then shook it. “No. Hurt is bad.”

“Exactly. Now; you were saying something about chocolate pudding?”

Her attention firmly redirected, her curiosity quenched, Leia tugged on his hand and drew him and Mon onwards, but Bail and Mon shared a look. If Padmé was where they thought her to be, and with whom, Max’s search was for his own demise... and Padmé was beyond their ability to save.

Month Twenty Four, Day 30 PEF

Chapter 65

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Four, Day Thirty PEF

early morning

Padmé woke with a start, the feel of the catatonia that accompanied the worst of her nightmares heavy within her blood as the images of her children, indistinct blobs of pink, disappearing beyond her reach threatened to swamp her.

Nausea welled up in her throat and she pushed off the sofa, bolting for the 'fresher where she was promptly sick. Half sobbing as she tried to catch her breath, she leaned her head back against the wall as tears streamed unnoticed down her cheeks.

The taste in her mouth was sour; an echo of her feelings, her arms trembling as they sought the refuge that was the comfort of her children's bodies... and knew it was beyond her. Disorientation struck as she pulled herself to her feet, sagging against the sink as she ran some water to wash her mouth out. It was a struggle to focus on her reflection in the mirror and, after that first glimpse, ignored it.

Who cared what she looked like when her children couldn't see it?

Caught by the undertow of the emotional riptide that always accompanied a bad dream, she wasn't prepared for the way *this* one battered down all of her defenses and slammed into her forcefully. Stifling a sob with one fisted hand, she slid along the wall and nearly fell into the partially open doorway that was Vader's room.

Catching herself on the door frame, she stopped, staring at the man who lay sprawled across the mattress, one arm caught around one of the pillows and holding it close, the sheets at an angle, low across his strong buttocks before partially falling off the bed. She swallowed hard, well able to see his curly hair and shadowed face, relaxed in slumber.

"Anak-."

He stirred and she faltered, cringing against the frame even as she craved the comfort she knew he could give, the reality slamming home as the trappings of their surroundings penetrated the fog of her nightmare. Her sob caught in her throat. Vader. Anakin. Two halves of a whole; two sides of the same coin. Looking as he did in slumber, it was hard to differentiate between them but, as she stood there in the doorway, found she couldn't bring herself to seek comfort in his arms.

He was the cause of her pain; the root of it and there was no way to free herself from it. Daily she became more enmeshed in its web yet, despite the conflict between them, his nearness was comforting.

Her gaze dropped from the bed where he lay sprawled in such tempting disarray and she spied the pillows and blankets he'd kicked off in his sleep. Never a restful sleeper, she recognized the sleeping pattern as one she'd often seen, that sign spurring her into motion more than anything. Easing forward, she dropped to her knees and climbed into the discarded blankets.

Anakin's scent enveloped her, cocooning her in memory and comfort, and she burrowed into it, wrapping herself within the covers as she curled into a fetal position. Squeezing her eyes shut, she concentrated on her breathing and nothing more.

In.

Out.

With each breath she inhaled *his* scent; took comfort in it the way she couldn't allow herself to take comfort in Vader's arms. Blankets were safe; blankets hadn't betrayed her. Blankets weren't the reason her children were missing.

In.

Out.

In...

Sometime in the middle of one breath to the next, the thought that she should set her chono as she had the last time she'd ended up on his floor flitted through her mind, but disappeared almost instantly as sleep, deep and dark and mercifully nightmare free, claimed her.

"I do not know what has come over her, Artoo," Threepio told the droid as they were charging in Vader's office in the early hours of the morning. "She was most distraught when given the news about Master Anakin. She has simply not been herself since beginning this campaign."

Artoo tooted a reply that quickly became a complex series of whistles and beeps.

"I was in no way implying that Lord Vader was not affected by the news of her death," Threepio retorted stiffly. "I expect it was a most unpleasant experience on both sides. I simply do not understand how they can be so antagonistic when they have finally been reunited."

There was another flurry of explanation from Artoo which had Threepio shaking his head.

"I do not understand it any better than you, my friend. Perhaps now that I am here, we can find a solution that will bring them together once more. I do so hate to see Mistress Padmé so unhappy. And Lord Vader as well, of course."

Artoo whistled softly, the sound more of a muted wail of despair than one of hope.

"Do not worry, Artoo." Turning his counterpart, Threepio attached the cable that would allow them to interface and share what memories and experiences they wished. "With our combined knowledge, we will think of something."

morning

Vader woke with a yawn, stretching as he did most mornings before throwing back the sheet and swinging his legs over the side. The day before Empire day; a day he'd rather do without. Preparations would begin for the festivals, speeches, celebrations and meaningless platitudes that would be offered by sycophantic dignitaries.

Force, he sometimes *hated* Empire Day!

He turned his head to crack his neck — and stopped. His brow furrowed as he realized there was a lump that seemed out of place inside his covers near the end of the bed. Pushing to his feet, he approached it, stopping to stare down at the haggard visage of his errant wife; a wife that he could clearly recall saying that she would never step foot in his chambers again.

She looked slightly better, the soft rise and fall of her even breathing indicating she was sleeping and peacefully for once.

Frowning, he crouched, examining her face and couldn't help but wonder how long she'd been there or if she'd done it before, curled up to sleep where he couldn't reach her as she drew on his presence for comfort. Taking in her protective posture and the way she'd wrapped his covers so tightly about her frame, as if wrapped in his arms, his heart squeezed painfully.

He couldn't miss the implications of the act or the revelation; no matter what he'd done to try and show her otherwise, she *still* couldn't turn to him for comfort.

Pressing one bare knee to the ground, he planted his left hand beside it and dropped his metallic wrist over his other knee, watching her. The rise and fall of her chest was reassuring, probably the deepest, most peaceful sleep she'd had for some time.

Her nose wrinkled, a strand of her hair tickling it.

Reaching out one hand, he gently brushed the hair from her face and she stirred. The cool metal of his metallic fingers drew her from slumber as they brushed against her skin and he winced, not having intended to do so. Still, he didn't move from his position as he watched her wake.

She did so slowly, as if emerging from a web of grasping, clinging, comforting oblivion with effort. Her eyes were unfocused, much like they'd been a couple of days before when Threepio had summoned him to wake her from her nightmare, except this time she wasn't seeing the twins or their captors; this time he suspected she wasn't seeing much of anything. Her emotions were blanked; like a clean slate, relaxed and a jumble of soft confusion, unlike the raw desolation that was more and more on the surface.

He hated to wake her.

"Padmé."

She turned her gaze his way and, as their eyes locked, she instantly stiffened, her gaze skittering away almost immediately. Reality came back with the impact of a pod racer against a canyon wall and almost with as much of a devastating effect. He saw the way her memories impacted her, as if she was expecting a physical blow and was braced to meet it. Unease was written into every line of her posture as she struggled free of the blankets

Just *feeling* her emotions was like getting kicked below the belt, but he ruthlessly forced himself to ignore it; they'd become a staple for living with her. Instead he focused on the here and now and the fact she was in his bedchamber. "I'm surprised to see you here."

Her eyes shouldered stiffened at his almost haughty, smug tone, her response flat as she pushed the blanket down her arms, unwinding it from around her waist as she focused on her task and couldn't meet his gaze. "I had another dream."

It was the physical manifestation of the linger pain in her voice that persuaded him not to pursue his line of smug inquiry; he'd already hurt her once and had no intention of doing so again. Wounded as she was by the previous night's nightmares, he wasn't about to start another fight with her. Instead he reached out, brushing the backs of his fingers across her cheek.

She tilted her head, smacking his hand away. "Don't," she told him curtly, going back to unwinding the sheet; she was almost free.

Irritated she couldn't bring herself to accept the comfort he offered even now, even after he'd discovered her stop-gap measure for sleep, his lips thinned, but he managed to keep his irritation out of his voice. "Padmé—"

"I don't know," cutting him off before he could say anything further, her words were hard, at odds with her roiling emotions, "why I came in here. I shouldn't have and it's a mistake. I should never have..." she pulled the blanket free and tossed it away before staggering to her feet with the use of the bed post. Her eyes widened as he straightened with her, color flooding her cheeks as she suddenly seemed to realize he was standing before her without a stitch on and her eyes dropped down his body, centering on his hips for a long moment before she averted her face immediately.

"Pad—"

"Don't," she told him again, her voice breaking as she took a step away, holding up her hands in a gesture meant to keep him at bay. Somehow she gathered herself, drawing upon the core of steel he'd seen so often during her captivity, her defenses slamming firmly into place — but not as firmly as she'd have liked. He could sense she was wavering, slowly succumbing to the pull of her despair... and wasn't willing to let him help her. "Don't touch me. I shouldn't have... this is wrong."

Biting his tongue, for he didn't see anything *wrong* about her turning to him for anything, Vader dropped the hand he'd extended her way. She continued to back away, around the end of the bed and then spun, heading for the door, tossing her words back over her shoulder.

"Just leave me alone — and for Force sakes, put something on!"

A sound of annoyance passed his lips as he bit back the hash retort he wanted to give, plowing his fingers through his hair and clenching his fists. Giving his hair a sharp tug to help alleviate some of the frustration he was feeling, he let his hands fall to the sides before following her to the door, watching the sway of her hips as she marched back to the lounge where she'd been trying to sleep when he'd crawled into bed that night. Her back firmly to him, her spine straight, her whole manner echoed her demand — except he could feel the way she was struggling with her actions; the lid to her emotions regarding *him* hadn't yet been replaced and, on top of that, he could sense her embarrassment.

Wishing he could say something, he knew he didn't dare without knowing he wouldn't inadvertently make things worse. He chose to ignore his own need to go after her, to offer the only comfort she'd yet accepted — mostly because he knew he'd be turned down flat — and turned to grant the one request he knew he could; he dressed for the day.

Exiting his room several minutes later as he adjusted the fasteners on his right handed glove, he looked about to find Padmé still in her position on the sofa. He paused, giving the fastener a more violent jerk than necessary to secure it before belting it down, taking in her posture once again.

Like her words, it was rigid and uncompromising; she really did want him to leave her alone — or so she was intent on portraying.

Despite that, he'd felt the way she she'd woken, for once momentarily free of the burden of her memories and more than anything he desired to see that continue. When at peace, she slept; when she slept, she ate; when she ate... well, he had no interest in seeing her waste any further away and deep down he was terrified she would and there'd be nothing he could do to stop it.

Despite his own desires to help, there was nothing she would accept from him at that moment. Shaking his head once, he headed for the door to the suite without saying anything to her, knowing she wouldn't welcome whatever sentiment he might voice.

She didn't stop him as the door closed between them and he headed for the outside door to his office. Walking through the suite would have been counterproductive and he wasn't about to force an argument or confrontation when she was mentally regrouping after a morning's uninterrupted sleep. He owed her that much.

Stepping into his office, he pulled up short upon seeing Artoo and Threepio plugged into a charging console near the inner door.

"Artoo? Threepio? What're you doing in here?"

"Oh! Lord Vader!" Threepio reached over and unhooked the coupling that linked him and Artoo before pulling away from the charging station. "My apologies, sir; Artoo told me there was a charging station within your suite but we had thought to avoid disturbing you and Mistress Padmé. It has been oh so long since we interfaced."

Vader shook his head and waved away the apology. "Forget it, Threepio; we appreciate the thought. Are you two finished?"

"For the moment, sir. Do you require our assistance?"

"Padmé could probably use your company, something to keep her mind off another set of nightmares."

"Forgive me sir, but should *you* not try and—"

"I did," he cut the droid off curtly. "She doesn't want my company... but she might appreciate yours."

"I am sorry, sir. Very good, sir. Will that be all?"

“That’ll do for now; I won’t be joining you for meals today so don’t bother to make me anything.”

“Yes, sir.”

When the droid hesitated, Vader swept further into the room and headed for his desk. “Was there something else, Threepio?”

“No sir; enjoy your day.”

The inner door to his office opened and the protocol droid departed, leaving Vader alone with a silent Artoo. Turning on his computer, Vader waited for the boot screen and then keyed in his password. Conscious of the silent astromech, he pulled up a series of instructions that had been transmitted to him the day before the last Empire day; speeches he’d need to prerecord, functions he’d need to decline to attend. With the invasion of Toydaria, he had an excuse to avoid all but the local events on his ship.

He perused the list for several minutes, sending the first of his ‘regrets’ before looking up with an irritated scowl. “*What*, Artoo?”

The droid was silent for a second before voicing a query and Vader slumped back in his chair, rubbing one hand over his face.

“If I could think of something to say that would make her listen to me, don’t you think I’d say it? I’d give just about anything to have her turn to me, but I can’t *make* her!”

Artoo let out a distraught sound that bordered on a scold.

“What else would you have me do, Artoo? Let her go? Give her the freedom to search for *our* children by herself and paint a target on her back again? I can’t do it; I won’t do it — she belongs here with me; here where I can keep her safe. Where I can protect her.”

With a final whistle, Artoo made no further sounds as he turned and followed the path Threepio had taken.

Vader planted his elbows on his desk and rubbed his palms hard over his face. Frustration boiled through his veins; frustration at the fact his wife didn’t trust him, brought home by Artoo’s comments and criticism. What else could he do, what else would reach her?

He didn’t know.

It made him feel helpless; weak. It made him feel...

Dropping his hands he pushed away from the desk with a violent shove and almost jumped to his feet; he couldn’t deal with this right now and refused to dwell on it. If Padmé wouldn’t turn to him for help and since he didn’t yet know what trigger would be needed to make it happen, he would focus on the next couple of days and his responsibilities to the Empire instead.

He didn’t like it, but it was all he could do until the shell of his wife’s resistance was fatally cracked and fell away for good.

Month Twenty Five, Day 1 PEF

grin I love the speculation and varying opinions this story gets... everyone empathizes with something different and wants something different.

The good news is that my muse is being very cooperative with this story right now and, with all of the information and plot bunnies and plot points **Daenarra** has left me, it's easy enough to update more quickly...

I'm going to see if I can't update three times a month this year — maybe more... we'll see; I'm on a roll and already have quite a few chapters written ahead

So update today — and tomorrow ;)

Happy New Year everyone :D

Chapter 66

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Five, Day One PEF

"An impressive gift, Lord Vader," Emperor Palpatine's expression was difficult to read under his cowl, but there was no mistaking his smile. *"Fitting for the occasion."*

"Toydaria will cause you no more problems, my Master," Vader assured him with a tight smile. "The last resistance was eliminated this morning. My apologies for being unable to return to Coruscant for the festivities; as you will see, subjugating the populace took longer than anticipated."

"And what had the Hutts to say with your incursion into their space, Lord Vader?"

"Surprisingly little, my Master," Vader's expression was tight. "I expect I will be seeing a delegation soon but will deal with it when they arrive. Toydaria is on the edge of Hutt space with little in the way of benefit to the Hutts."

"Excellent. I trust you have a full report?"

Vader lifted one hand to the board on his left where Palpatine couldn't see and used the Force to flick a switch. "It is being transmitted now, Master."

A nod was his response. *"I will expect your next progress report once the garrison has been established and any slaves ready for shipment along with a follow up when the Hutts make contact. I have no wish to alienate a valuable trade partner."*

"I have many contacts and good relations among the Hutts, Master," Vader informed him wryly, well aware that Palpatine knew it. "I will see to it there are no negative ramifications to this attack. The Hutts, if nothing else, understand strength and self defense. It will not be an issue."

"Well done, Lord Vader."

"Thank you, my Master."

“Have you more to report on her behavior?”

Vader’s eyes glittered and instead of answering, countered the question with one of his own. “Have you had unfavorable reports, my Lord?”

“I have had no reports, Lord Vader.”

Which, Vader knew instantly, was the source of Palpatine’s questions; his Master was used to manipulating the people around him and doing so with great dexterity. That Vader wasn’t cooperating in this instant by confirming Padmé’s presence would have been infuriating. Keeping his Master guessing was surprisingly refreshing. So, instead of confirming anything,, Vader pretended to misunderstand the comment.

“Ventress has excelled in the tasks presented to her,” he offered. “She offers a quick solution to petty disputes that are beneath my notice.”

Palpatine’s eyes gleamed even in the holo, his expression dark; he hadn’t been speaking of Asajj and knew that Vader knew it. But a counter deception earned Vader grudging respect; he could see it in the Emperor’s eyes. *“A good use of her skills, but not a wise use.”*

“As your suggested, Master, she has been given other business to keep her occupied, more in line with her talents.” It implied that Asajj was searching for Padmé; which wasn’t exactly untrue as the Force adept had been given that assignment, Vader was simply neglecting to admit that it had been completed.

“And on your hunt, my apprentice?”

Again a trick question, so Vader answered it the simplest way he could; with a truth that wasn’t the truth Palpatine wanted. “I’ve three more sabers to add to my collection, Master. Several more to follow. Those who have fled thus far can run and hide, but I will track the traitors to the ends of the Galaxy if I must. I swear it,” he clenched his fist to affirm the vow, “the Jedi will pay for their treachery and they will not escape me for long.”

“Good. Good. Send me your trophies. I would see them for myself.”

Palpatine’s holo flickered and died, cutting off the transmission and Vader rose from his kneeling position in the holo transmission chamber reserved specifically for these transmissions.

The end of that conversation had not gone as planned though he should have been prepared for it since he’d not contacted his Master since returning from Coruscant. Few things occupied him like Padmé’s presence so it was logical that Palpatine had drawn a conclusion he expected to have confirmed.

Vader wasn’t about to forfeit Padmé’s life by doing so. The longer his Master suspected Asajj hunted for her, the safer she was.

He turned, exiting, the chamber with a shake of his head and back out into the bridge area. Empire Day for him was a series of speeches, a day to reward those who’d earned it. Unlike the days when he would eliminate someone useless and have them replaced, today was a day of regulation and rule instead of snap decision.

Today would be a series of ceremonies as department heads rewarded those under them for hard work and dedication.

Vader knew a thing or two about hard work and dedication — it had driven him to where he was now — but this particular series of ceremonies always left him uncomfortable. He detested being put on display, much preferring to be in the thick of a battlefield than making speeches about the Empire and the need for the men to take pride in their accomplishments.

Checking his chrono, he realized he had a little time to kill and, seeing as how the day was stressful for him, perhaps he might be able to alleviate some of that by spending some time with his wife. Even if she wasn't speaking with him, there was nothing that said he couldn't speak with her, or rather *ather*, to clear his own mind.

Heading for his quarters, he accepted a datapad passed to him by one of the aids and started perusing it as he traveled down. Reaching his floor, he flipped the pages within the electronic document, scrolling through a mass of instructions as he passed down the corridors. Without looking, he lifted one hand to acknowledge the troopers guarding the door, an indication that Padmé was within, and stepped through the portal after keying in the code without looking at it.

Reading the last page as he reached the lounge, he threw it disgustedly on the low table. "Ugh. Sometimes I hate this day of the year," seeing that she was standing silently by the viewport, he paced behind her, not really taking note of the fact that she wasn't just silent, but had gone rigid and still with his words. "The pomp. The circumstance. Why should *I* have to give a speech just because it happens to be on this day of the year that the Empire officially became a reality?"

Padmé didn't answer and he sighed, running one hand through his hair. "Unlike you, I never took to public speaking; I *hate* it. Especially today. I never know what to say! I mean, really, who *cares* if we celebrate big or small? Does what I have to say really matter all that much? Honestly; in the grand scheme of things, it's just another day and any diplomat can make the speeches I'm being given!"

If anything her posture turned more rigid and his line of complaints drew none of her ire. Frowning, Vader stopped pacing and examined her critically. The veins and tendons on her neck stood out, as if she was holding herself so tightly she would break if she relaxed even a smidgen.

"Padmé?"

There was a half second of silence.

"You don't know *what* today is, do you?"

"Of course I do; it's Empire Day. The first official day the Emperor took control and brought about galactic peace; the day the Separatists were eliminated and order restored and the *only* day of the year I have to be more of a politician than any other. The—"

"Yes," her even tone cut him off, her voice devoid of emotion; dead. "It's not just that, though. It's much more important."

Annoyed and confused she seemed immune to his dilemma, he crossed his arms over his chest. Her emotions, always a jumble, were surprisingly clear; a sorrow so poignantly powerful and encompassing he was surprised he hadn't noticed it when he walked in. Even as

they flowed over him now, he couldn't keep the irritation from his tone. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Today is the day Luke and Leia were born."

The words were dropped with the effective subtlety of a bomb, detonating between them almost like an accusation despite the even cadence of her words. Silence descended as the blow hit him below the belt from nowhere; he hadn't known.

In all their discussions, Padmé had never told him their exact birthday and his anger and annoyance fell away under the weight of her emotionless statement. It had been lifeless, completely and utterly without inflection. Her words reverberated around in his head, lodging in his chest and a band tightened about it as if he was suddenly caught in a vice grip.

Empire Day; the twin's lifeday.

Suddenly he didn't hate it as he had moments ago and it wasn't the worst day of the year for him anymore; yet it was because their children weren't there with them where they should have been.

"It seems like it happened to someone else," she offered, her voice cracking with sudden emotion as her soft words reached him. 'It seems like they're not even mine. Like I never sheltered them within my body, carried them for months as they grew or gave them life.' As he watched in silent shock, she wrapped her arms about her own middle, her knuckles immediately going white as she gripped her shirt tightly. "It feels like it was a dream; a beautiful, surreal dream... and I know it's not. It's not... and all I w-want is to hold them. To tell them I love them... to wish my them a happy lifeday — and I can't. I *can't* because... because I don't even know where they are."

Silent sobs wracked her body in a sudden meltdown as the emotional strain became too much. A massive fissure formed in her mental armor, the combination of the day and her reality, and Padmé was helpless to stop it. Her hands disengaged from her waist and she covered her face in an attempt to contain herself. "They're t-two today... two..."

Vader approached her carefully, spurred into motion by the way she seemed to fold in on herself, unable to stay motionless. She'd not been so open, so *vulnerable* with him since those first nightmares when she'd thought him someone else. Reaching out, he slid one hand onto her shoulder, wincing as he felt the damn erode further. "Padmé, I..."

She spun unexpectedly, her arms sliding around his waist and latched onto him with a fierce grip. Shaking, she buried her face in his chest.

Reacting on instinct more than with conscious thought, his arms encircled her, protecting her, *comforting* her as she'd not yet allowed him to do. Pressing his lips to her forehead, his throat tightened as she cried, her tears soaking his shirt.

It would have been easier if her tears weren't leaking down her cheeks in a silent stream; tears that indicated a wound so deep and devastating, there was no sound that could vocalize its agony.

Adjusting his grip on her, he gently stroked her hair, rubbing her back as he willed her to absorb his strength, wishing he could do something, anything, to help ease the pain of this separation. Tucking his head down to hers, he brushed his lips over her temple before burying

them in the hair over her ear, squeezing his eyes shut as he curled about her in an instinctively protective embrace. Sheltering her as best he could from the agony and desolation he could sense hemorrhaging from her.

Emotions he could feel within himself.

Padmé clung to him, gripping him with a strength he hadn't known she still possessed, as if he were her only life line. Her only anchor within the emotional storm that buffered them, she pulled from him the strength he offered, and offered gladly. Slowly, ever so slowly, her tears ebbed, but didn't die.

"I miss them so much, Ani."

He let the name pass; in fact, didn't even register as wrong that she'd called him anything but his old nickname.

"I want them back... I just... I just want my babies back so... so *much*..."

His heart squeezed painfully in his chest and he adjusted his hold on her again, brushing his lips over her temple once more. "I'll find them, Padmé," he promised softly, earnestly, determined to do just that. "I'll find them and bring them home."

She stiffened in his embrace, tilting her head back and his grip on her eased, allowing her to look up at him. She blinked, the tears in her eyes drying even as several more drops slid down her cheeks. Her eyes glittered with a light he couldn't understand as he lifted one hand to brush her hair from her face.

"Home," she repeated the word as if she'd never heard it before. There was a long moment of silence before she continued. "Do you mean here?"

"Of course," he offered with a tender smile, attempting to reassure her. "It's where they belong, after all; with you and me."

Much to his surprise, her expression darkened and he could almost *see* the way her defenses sprang back into existence as she pulled out of his embrace and scrambled to recover her wits. "Never! I'd rather they remain lost than have them here with you for their father!"

Stung, he grabbed her by the arms, and looked down at her with repressed fury and hurt. "They're my children as much as yours, Padmé."

"I told you not to look for them; I told you I don't—"

"I have as much right to them as you do!"

"You lost that right the night you killed the temple younglings!"

"Better that they die," he informed her icily, "than be further corrupted by the Jed and their antiquated ideas. Living half a live in service to a false ideal is no life at all!"

"You're the one who's corrupted," she snapped back. "Did it ever occur to you that Luke or Leia could have been among those younglings if they'd been born earlier? Would you have killed them too?"

If she'd slapped him, he wouldn't have felt so enraged. "Never; I would *never* harm my own children!" He shook her, once, trying to snap her out of the anger; he'd rather have her

crying and seeking solace in his arms than spitting righteous fury at him about this. “Luke and Leia would never have been in the crèche to start with; I would never have allowed the Jedi to take them from you!”

“And yet they’re still missing,” she threw back at him angrily, dashing away angry tears. “They’re missing because you, their *father* turned his back on every ideal he’d ever fought for and joined the Darkside. They’re missing because *you* became a Sith.’ Tearing out of his arms, she backed away. “I will *never* let my children follow in your footsteps; they will not become what you’ve become!”

“Now that you’re here with me, you don’t have a choice.”

“As long as Luke and Leia remain lost, they’re lost to us both; which means you will *never* be able to train them. I would rather they stay lost than be exposed to whatever twisted you into this!” Spinning on her heel she made to walk away. “I’m going to take a shower; I feel dirty.”

Two steps brought him even with her, his hand shooting out to grab her upper arm and spin her back his way. His other hand slid along her jaw to prevent her escape as his lips came down on hers, hard. It was a brutal kiss, far more aggressive than he’d intended, but she’d made him angry and it translated into his behavior.

Having her pull away was no surprise and the hand that had been on her arm shot out to catch her wrist before her hand would have pulled back to connect with his cheek. Face to face, nose to nose, his tone was deliberately silky, a verbal caress with a core of steel; a manifestation of his anger at the way she’d reacted to his offer. A way to sting her back for the way she’d just stung him. “You wouldn’t want to hit your beloved husband and the father of your children, would you?”

“If you weren’t so quick,” ripping her hand away from his grip, her defenses now firmly in place, she glared at him. “I’d wipe that smug look right off your face; I *hate* you!”

His brows drew together as she stormed away, the door to the ‘fresher sliding shut behind her.

The anger she left behind was laced with hurt and he watched the door until he heard the shower start. Exhaling a frustrated sigh, he whirled and took the steps necessary to unconsciously assume Padmé’s previous pose at the viewport, gripping the edge with both hands.

Were she anyone else, he’d have long since been done with her, but this was Padmé, his wife; his *love*. It troubled him that she’d been able to accept his comfort, his embrace — had been doing just that! — but wasn’t ready to accept anything more from him. Wasn’t ready to accept who he was or what steps he was willing to take to see their children returned; to wipe the sorrow from her soul once and for all.

Hadn’t he already proved that he’d go to any lengths to keep her safe? Hadn’t he already proved that her well being was paramount to his existence? He hadn’t been lying when he’d made his pledge to his Master; he *couldn’t* live without her. The time he’d thought her dead had only brought it home in a fashion no one had ever expected; only Artoo had kept him sane.

The beeping of his comlink was a welcome distraction from his troubling thoughts. “Yes?”

“The men await you on deck, Lord Vader; the assembly is ready for your speech.”

Assembly? Speech? Vader drew a blank, not understanding to what the General referred — and then it hit him as he recalled what he’d been doing before coming to speak with Padmé. Before he’d been informed of a crucial piece of information about his children; their lifeday.

Empire Day.

Pushing away from the viewport, he extended his hand towards the table where he’d thrown the datapad upon entering the lounge and called it to him using the Force.

His mind still on his and Padmé’s latest exchange of opinions, he was suddenly grateful he needed to do little more than show up, read a script and leave; anything more at that moment was beyond him. His mind was firmly with his wife and missing children and the lifeday celebration they wouldn’t be sharing.

“My Lord? Are you there?”

“I’ll be right there, General.”

Evening

Vader didn’t return to the suite after the Empire Day celebrations as he was under no illusions that his wife would turn to him again that night. She was angry with him, upset he’d offered to do the one thing that could alleviate her sorrow and it irked and frustrated him but was also sad. Sad that she didn’t trust him not to use their children against her.

Still, he left her to the care of Threepio and Artoo, both droids having been informed that he would be busy for most of the day, and took his earliest opportunity to escape.

With his thoughts centered on the twins and that their lifeday was Empire Day, he’d been given an essential new fact in tracking them down. With the billions of beings in the galaxy, it would take some time, especially since humans were so numerous.

But really, how many children could have been born on Empire Day?

Settling himself at his desk, he turned on the console and entered his password, all the while already working out the search details in his mind. Calling up the Galactic birth record database, courtesy of a high powered transmitter that reached Coruscant, he entered his search criteria with care; if Padmé had named their children before they’d been taken, as she appeared to have done, he doubted they’d have been left with them and, even if they had, once she’d come out of the coma, he suspected their names might have changed.

He tried his own last name first; the last name she hadn’t been able to officially adopt through their marriage. Unsurprisingly, Skywalker turned up nothing for the timeframe indicated. A quick check on her maiden name, Naberrie, showed none of her family had added to the tree either.

Not that he’d expected the search to be that easy.

Selecting a quick search, he entered Empire Day, year “0” as his search criteria. Immediately the billions of babies who had been registered into the galactic database upon

their births were visible, all races and set types. As a lark, he entered the name “Luke” as a sorting tactic... and grimaced.

There were over ninety million babies listed.

He did the same with “Leia” and found about half of that — which was still millions too many.

With a frown, he added a couple more parameters; human and female; it didn’t eliminate as many as he’d hoped. Organizing them alphabetically by world, the task suddenly seemed daunting. Scanning the list of names without really hoping to find, he arched his eyebrows upon seeing a familiar one on Alderaan near the top of the list; Organa.

Leia Organa.

Selecting the entry, he scanned it; only child to Breha and Bail, born on Empire Day. He hadn’t been aware that the Senator’s wife had been expecting. Had he even been aware the man was married? He shook the thought away. There was a blurry picture in the file to accompany the entry and the Organa baby looked like any other he’d ever seen.

Bail’s Leia was an only child; as such, she couldn’t possibly be Vader’s daughter. *And even if they had been separated, Vader reflected, realizing it was a possibility but refusing to dwell on it, they’d never have given her to such a prominent family. With Bail always in the spot light, it’d be too dangerous for him to keep one of our children. Too easy to track, like Padmé’s on Naboo or the Lars clan on Tatooine.*

If whomever had taken them even *knew* about Owen and Beru — which was unlikely.

Rubbing his forehead, he closed the entry and moved on. Continuing his search, Vader narrowed the parameters down even further, eliminating those like Leia Organa who were only children and leaving behind several tens of thousands of children named Leia who had siblings the same age or twins. He then removed anyone who was a triplet, but not additional siblings.

The number dropped further, plummeting into the hundreds when he added “Luke” as a sibling’s name.

Excellent.

A few hundred compared the billions he’d started with and the tens of billions he’d needed to search before when he hadn’t had the twins’ birth date.

Reorganizing the list to include the names of the first baby Leia with a brother Luke who was the furthest from both Coruscant and Mustafar, he began compiling a list of planets for Cleek to check. Starting with those with the most distance between both of those worlds, he set to work.

Padmé might not want his help in tracking down their children, but he wasn’t about to stop searching no matter how much she railed at him. Her continued well being depended on it.

Month Twenty Five, Day 3 PEF

Vader looking for the twins everywhere but where they are and already discounting the most likely places is one of those things Daenarra and I discussed. As Padmé hasn't been willing to share the identities of the Alliance members who took them, Vader doesn't know that Bail is one of them. Nor does he [or Padmé for that matter] know that Obi-Wan had anything to do with the decision for where the twins would go.

On another note, I really wish **Daenarra** was around for this update since it's one we *both* were looking forward to so much. Many of the next updates are *sighs* Ah well; hopefully she'll be back soon!

Happy New Years guys; here's the January 1 update.

Welcome to 2012 everyone!

Chapter 67

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Five, Day Three PEF

"I am afraid, Lord Vader, that Mistress Padmé has been silent since yesterday. She did not sleep last night, she refuses to eat and I am afraid she has not moved from the sofa."

No more than what Vader expected after their discussion on Empire Day.

It was the hardest day of the year for her and he hadn't helped make it easier. He'd opened his office door, just in case she needed company, but she'd not turned to him any further. Her mood hadn't improved and he's sensed the continued swirl about her, but the crying jag in his arms appeared to have been enough to temporarily augment her determination to stay away from him.

It had only boosted his own determination to find the twins and, thus far, his every waking moment since being released from the Empire Day festivities had been devoted to sifting through the information he'd been able to garner with the knowledge of their lifedate. It was a tedious task, one he should probably have allocated to Artoo, but it made him feel as if he were doing *something* that would eventually help his wife.

It was simply slow going and he had to be careful not to overlook anything. The thought he might not find them didn't even enter his mind; he *would* because that was what Padmé needed and he would move the cosmos for her.

Still, Padmé hadn't liked the idea that he was searching, had in fact denied wanting him to yet against this morning in a waspish manner that had driven him here. He'd needed an escape and working on Threepio, a task he'd been intending to do since the droid's return, had been just the excuse.

Anything to get him away from her sharp tongue and his diminishing patience with it.

"It's not your fault Threepio," Vader assured him as he nodded to the corner of his work shop where the platform with a small ramp leading to it waited. "The scanning equipment is over there."

Threepio had followed him down to the hangar bay's workshop, determined to speak with him no matter the locale and despite the fact the shop contained no more than Vader's as of yet not ready to fly fighter which remained in pieces. With Vader's instructions, the droid shuffled over to the platform indicated as Vader began undoing the fasteners on his glove. Working on anything was delicate work and, as much he prided himself on his mechanical hand's dexterity, the glove sometimes got in the way.

"I wish I could believe you sir, but I have never seen her this bad."

It made Vader think of the first time he'd seen Padmé after she'd woken from one of her nightmares without him; the prolonged catatonic state she'd entered had been unlike anything he'd ever seen and terrifying. He could well understand Threepio's concern. "The first time she had a nightmare here, I thought the same thing, Threepio, but her nightmares are getting worse. Until she comes to me, I can't help her."

"I am afraid, Lord Vader, that she is doing more harm than good in denying herself your comfort."

Not something Vader wanted to reflect on, but nothing he'd not thought himself. As long as Threepio didn't mention *that man* again, Vader would be fine. "I've thought the same thing." Placing his glove aside, he turned to the droid. "Another couple of steps, Threepio. Once I've gone through the preliminary scans and, if there's nothing wrong, we'll get you into an oil bath."

"Oh!" The delight in the droid's tone made Vader grin. "That would be just *wonderful*, sir. It has been some time since I have had such a luxury."

A machine descended from the ceiling and did a quick body scan of the droid. "You've more than earned it," stepping in as the scanner retracted, Vader hooked up a series of diagnostics to Threepio's main interface on the back of his head and body before connecting them into his datapad. "Padmé doesn't appear to have had an easy time of it since she was taken with you from Mustafar."

"Indeed not, sir."

"Do you remember that flight, Threepio?"

"I am afraid my memories of the incident are incomplete, Lord Vader."

Threepio apologized as Vader tapped a couple of things on the diagnostic screen. The scan information fed through and he was surprised to find the quick scan had revealed little to no damage. A couple of wires in one leg were flagged as potential problems, but overall the droid's physical systems seemed to be in great shape. The droid's memory banks however...

"The data in my memory core for the time frame specified appears to have suffered heavy damage and I cannot access the information."

"I'm reading quite a few damaged memory sectors, Threepio; Padmé mentioned you've been partially wiped while she was in her coma but I might be able to reconstruct it."

"That would be wonderful, sir; it would be helpful to have my memory back."

A grin suddenly appeared on his lips. "How can it be a memory if you don't remember losing it?"

"As you said sir, it is fragmented. Some of these fragments, more than others, indicated a wipe and are recalled out of context. I, unfortunately, have no recollection as to who ordered it."

Vader's grin faded and then died. "You've got some pretty huge sections missing here, Threepio, old data intermingled with new. You'll be happy to know that none of its in your programming sectors; you didn't lose any of your language or protocol functionality."

"That is *such* a relief, sir!" gushed the droid. "I would hate to be in less than optimal condition should you or Mistress Padmé require such assistance."

Patting the droid on the shoulder, Vader set up a deep scan in an attempt to recover the data lost by the partial memory wipe and to look for anything else that might have been damaged. Hopefully it would be able to give him some insight into the workings of Padmé's group; perhaps even the location of a Jedi or two she'd stolen away. Not that he was about to share that with her. Hooking the datapad on one of Threepio's protruding bars, he stepped to stand in front of the protocol droid.

"Internal workings are looking good, Threepio, but leave that scan running for a bit; I just want to be sure."

"Of course, sir."

Rubbing one thumb along the carbon scoring on Threepio's shoulder, he lifted an eyebrow. "I think it's time for some cosmetic work. I can see a few dings and dents; scoring like this one... would you like that?"

"Followed by a buff and shine?"

"Of course."

"Thank the Maker!"

That heartfelt statement made Vader laugh, his tongue-in-cheek statement droll. "You're welcome."

"Oh!"

That sound said it all; Threepio hadn't considered the fact that it was his maker doing the work.

Grinning with a shake of his head, Vader bent to the task and it suddenly occurred to him that Threepio's presence wasn't just for boosting Padmé's spirits but his as well. The combination of serious and ridiculousness in the protocol droid never failed to amuse him. It was a kink, a quirk, in the programming he'd been intending to iron out and now that he had

the chance, Vader found he didn't want to. It was a part of Threepio's charm and he wasn't about to destroy that.

"Are you hoping to find something specific in my memory banks, Lord Vader?"

"Nothing specific, no," Vader admitted. He couldn't even guess at what secrets those memories would reveal until he assessed the damage. Unfortunately, a lot of the damage seemed to be centered around the time Padmé had been in her coma and it was a time frame of avid interest to him. "Are you settling in once again with your Mistress, Threepio?"

"Absolutely, sir. If I may say so, it is rather distressing to see that you and Mistress Padmé are fighting so much. I do not recall such animosity from any other time you spent together. In fact, my memory processors indicate quite the opposite."

"I'm working on it; you've got a dent as big as my fist in the back of your thigh, Threepio. You weren't in a battle or something, were you?"

"Not that I recall, sir. I have been through several falls and suffered some abused, but no fights."

"I get it, I get it," Vader muttered under his breath as the droid proceeded to babble, lifting off a series of events that might have contributed to his current condition. Ignoring the monologue of detail, Vader selected one of his suction hoses and attached it to the dent. As Threepio spoke, he flipped the machine on and drowned him out. Under the sound of compressed air there was a sudden popping noise as the bent plate jumped back into place.

Flicking off the machine, it amused Vader to no end that Threepio hadn't been the least bit fazed by the noise and appeared to have continued speaking through it. He did the same to a couple more minor dents without a change in Threepio's monologue before he set the hose aside

"—imagine it might have been when I was pushed down the ramp on the third moon of—"

"Threepio."

Turning his head to look, the golden droid gave Vader his attention — which was quickly stolen by a series of beeps and whistles from the doorway.

Vader bent to the next large dent, examining Threepio's outer casings with a critical eye. "It's nothing personal, Artoo," he offered by way of greeting, running his finger tips over the golden metal. "Threepio's not had a full diagnostic since I saw him last."

Artoo made a rude noise before trundling into the room.

Vader shot him a look as he attached the suction machine to Threepio again. "You had a complete diagnostic last month; the day before Padmé was brought on board." Flipping on the machine, Vader drowned out the astromech until he heard the *ping* of the dented plate being pulled back into place. Shutting down the machine again, Vader noted no other dings or dents that could use his attention and instead knelt at Threepio's back to check the visible wires for frays. "Sorry, Artoo, what was that?"

A complex series of beeps and whistles followed as Vader reached out one hand for the tool he'd need, calling it to him with the Force before setting to work loosening a bolt so he

could get to the worn wires he's spied underneath. Artoo's admonishment washed over him, the context much like the last 'discussion' they'd had.

"I've tried, Artoo," exasperated, Vader glared at the small droid. "I had her in my arms on Empire Day; I *offered* her support and she—"

A rude noise caught him off guard.

"There is no call for that kind of language, Artoo," Threepio scolded immediately. "I am certain that Lord Vader knows—"

"It's okay, Threepio; let him have his say. Force knows I've tried to reason with Padmé, I've been trying to be considerate of her feelings, but what else can I do? Nothing has worked. She's been with me a whole month now and it took the twin's lifeday to get her back into my arms even briefly." He shook his head, frustration evident in the movement as he pulled off the back plate of Threepio's leg and got his first real good look underneath.

As Padmé's animosity towards him hadn't shifted any great degree after their two bouts of lovemaking, both of which he reluctantly admitted, he'd been the instigator; he could hardly call that as her turning to him. It was a jarring and unwelcome realization and only served to feed his feelings about the situation. "If I could just find Luke and Leia, it would go a long way to showing her that my intentions aren't as dark as she thinks!"

A scornful sound followed a series of beeping sounds that could only be labeled instructions.

"Make nice? What do you think I've been *trying* to do?"

Artoo blatted at him and suddenly a holo appeared of him and Padmé complete with sound accompaniment. It was one of their fights; their *last* fight actually, on Empire Day.

"I lived through it, Artoo, I don't need the reminder." It switched off at Vader's terse comment. "Where'd you get that anyway; you weren't there."

"I believe sir, that he pulled it from my memory processors," Threepio was at his apologetic best as Vader carefully extracted the worn wire from the mess in Threepio's legs. Another call on the Force brought the next tool he'd need to his hand. "I was in my charging cycle when the event happened, sir, but not deactivated."

That explained it.

Another round of musical tones from Artoo washed over Vader as he pulled the wire free on both ends before snipping the covers. He'd left plenty of room for these kinds of repairs when he'd created Threepio and took advantage of it now. It took a moment, as he was stripping the ends of the wires and cutting them down before re-wrapping them in a colorful protective coating, to register Artoo's comments.

He stopped, looking up from his position on the floor when they did. "What more can I possibly do when she'd rather I was at the other end of the galaxy?"

The next instruction from the droid was short and to the point; almost curt.

"Right — like that'll work. Threepio's not exactly in any shape for me to go delving into his memory banks. They're a jumbled mess as it is!"

“Really Artoo, just what is it that you expect Lord Vader to find?”

A long whistle was accompanied by an almost respectful series of beeps.

“*What?*”

“I believe he said—”

“I heard him, Threepio,” Vader snapped irritably, blown away by the idea and reeling, not daring to hope. “How would you know what’s in Threepio’s memory banks, Artoo? They’re horribly corrupted, what you’re suggesting might not even be possible.”

Another rude noise accompanied that statement and if Artoo could have stuck his tongue out and stomped his foot, Vader suspected he would have. His scold wasn’t exactly a complimentary reflection on the Sith Lord’s intelligence.

“Artoo—”

The droid cut him off again, not finished, the scold continuing for some time as he listed Vader’s sins against the droid’s mistress; sins Vader was very much aware of.

“I didn’t—”

A loud *blat* cut him off a second time.

“R2D2, that is enough of that!” scolded Threepio, appalled. “How dare you speak with Lord Vader in such a fashion? I am certain he has already attempted to—”

Beeping and whistling, Artoo directed his comments Vader’s way, drowning out Threepio’s voice, and Vader felt them keenly. Reattaching the wire to Threepio’s leg, he soldered it in place before turning his attention back to the now silent astromech. Giving him a long look, Vader waited until he finished with the repair and had put the leg plate back on before addressing his longest standing friend.

“You’re right, Artoo,” he conceded reluctantly, ignoring Threepio’s surprised exclamation. “I can try if nothing else. If you’re right... *Force* I hope you’re right. It would give her... I mean...” Vader trailed off, considering the implications of what Artoo was suggesting. If there was information in Threepio’s processors that would soften Padmé’s attitude towards him, it might go a long way towards mellowing their relationship. Towards helping rebuild it. It might even invite a real discussion, not the thrown down fighting they’d been engaged in since her arrival.

“Threepio, I’m going to make a copy of some of the files in your memory banks.”

“Very well sir. I am afraid that most of the data Artoo is suggesting you search is likely corrupt. There may be nothing left to see.”

Artoo made an indignant sound.

“It’s okay Artoo, I know you’re certain,” Vader offered, pushing to his feet and checking on the diagnostic; it was finished.

Swapping out the data rods, he tucked the diagnostic one into his pocket — he’d look at it later — and pulled out an empty one. Sliding it into the slot, he set the data transfer for the

highest compression ratios and, without a second thought, reached around Threepio to shut him down; this would be easier without his commentary.

“What dates should I be searching?”

Following the droid’s instructions, Vader punched in a few numbers on the pad before calling up the directory of Threepio’s memory banks. It took some doing as he’d hidden them in a series of sub programs so not just anyone could gain access; a precaution when he and Padmé had been hiding their marriage. He hadn’t been willing to risk Threepio as being the leak that revealed them.

It took a few minutes to bypass the security protocols and booby traps he’d left in place for the unwary; traps that would have wiped select memories that would have been damaging to both he and Padmé. Later, when he wasn’t searching for something, he’d remove them. Now that the Jedi were gone, there was no need for secrecy — once she willingly took her place at his side that was.

Shaking away the thought, he navigated the codes carefully and selected the memory files Artoo suggested. On a lark, since he had the space, he added all of the time he and Padmé had been apart since she’d been taken from Mustafar up to the day she’d been brought to him here. While he was at it, he activated a subroutine he’d never used within the droid before; a homing beacon.

One that would be activated should it not receive a specially coded transmission daily; he had no intention of having Padmé disappear on him again.

It didn’t take long and the signal would be automatically sent from one of Vader’s personal computers. The rest of the data would take some time to copy and he hooked the data pad back where it had been before. “I hope you’re right about this, Artoo.”

He made a scolding noise that drew a smile from Vader.

“You’re right about that; if nothing else, it will show I can, how did you put it? Play nice with my wife?” A rude noise came from the droid and Vader chuckled. “That’s what I thought you said. I’ll come back in an hour or so when the transfer is done; keep an eye on him, would you?”

Without waiting for the droid’s affirmation, Vader strode from the work bay and headed straight for the lift. He took it up, not realizing he was without his glove until half way to his floor and shrugged it off. Padmé had ever accepted his artificial hand, it wouldn’t bother her.

He arrived at his floor and the lift drew to a halt, but as Vader made to step off he was uncharacteristically hesitant.

What if Artoo was wrong and the information he’d hinted at wasn’t in Threepio’s memory bank? What if it was a hoax, a false alarm? What if the holos were so corrupted he couldn’t repair them? Did he dare get Padmé’s hopes up, dare promise something he couldn’t deliver?

Decisively, he stepped back into the lift and headed back to the work bay without following through on what he’d intended to do; he wasn’t about to raise Padmé’s hopes. He couldn’t. It would crush her to be offered that kind of hope and then have it torn away; almost as much as it would probably crush him to do it.

No.

Until he found something worth sharing, he'd keep Artoo's implications to himself. Better to surprise her with whatever he'd found than have nothing to deliver when he informed her of the possibility. For now he'd hold his council, give Threepio the much anticipated oil bath and finish his repairs on the droid.

Threepio's enhanced performance and appearance would serve as a gift; a tactical move that could be viewed as an apology. Artoo had suggested he seek his wife's forgiveness for his insensitive behavior so he'd consider this gesture the first in a series. His plan of attack was simple; he was going to remind her of what a thoughtful, *caring* man he was until she cracked like she had on Empire Day.

From here on out he had no intention of fighting with her if he could help it and whatever Artoo suspected he'd find in Threepio's memory banks would ensure it.

He'd simply have to keep looking until he found something.

Month Twenty Five, Day 4 PEF

Ah Vader... biting off more than he can chew — but you guys are right; they're dysfunctional — and intended to be that way.

Note: This is actually a 'double' update which is what I'm going to try and do from now on; leave single days, where possible, in a single chapter... unless a chapter is needed to hammer home a point by itself for impact.

There are a couple of those coming up.

But, the plus side? There will be much longer chapters than before in a lot of instances; around 5000 or so words each :)

Thanks for reading Everyone!

Chapter 68

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Five, Day Four PEF

Morning

After working on Threepio for most of the free time he'd had the previous day, working with the General on the Toydarian situation as Asajj continued to wreak havoc among the populace and retiring late — but not so late he couldn't help but note Padmé hadn't been sleeping again — Vader woke the following morning to find her still in the same place she'd been the night before and determination has filled him.

He was going to find the holo Artoo had alluded to and quickly.

Unfortunately, he'd retrieved too much data. He'd been over zealous in the dates, and the first holo he examined was one of himself, climbing off the shuttle with Artoo after rescuing the Chancellor while Obi-Wan lounged in the doorway. Not wanting to watch himself interact with Obi-Wan, he stabbed off the holo part of the recording, listening to the audio only. He was able to hear Palpatine speaking with Mace Windu regarding Dooku's demise and General Grievous' escape. Listening with only half an ear, he heard himself speak with Bail Organa about Grievous, smiling as he heard himself withdrawing from the conversation and remembered in his mind's eye the reunion that had followed.

It was of the morning he'd found out about Padmé's pregnancy.

Pulling up the report he'd been updating for Palpatine, he stabbed the forward button, jumping it ahead to listen for several minutes as he worked on the report without the visual distraction. He'd been working for just over an hour when his own voice greeted him.

"A boy?"

Vader arched his eyebrows as and reached out to flip back on the holo recording. The record was of a hallway; the hallway at Padmé's apartment and their home on Coruscant, as Threepio walked towards the main terrace where he and Padmé had been sitting. It was a scene he remembered well and it was just a touch odd seeing it from the droid's perspective instead of his own memory; he hadn't realized Threepio had caught so much of it.

Padmé's response in the recording was low, amused. *"That's what the old midwives told my mother would happen when she was pregnant."*

"Except you only have a sister."

"Right."

Their image came into view as Threepio rounded the corner, and Vader blinked, arching his eyebrows. Before him was himself and Padmé, the smile on his own face a surprise. When had he last felt that sense of wonderment? The day she'd told him about the baby, maybe? He shook it off, watching his wife; the wife he remembered, her hands linked with his over the swell of her belly.

"Does that mean you don't want to know or just that you want to guess?"

Padmé's smile was teasing. *"I thought it would be better if we decided together. It didn't feel right asking the doctors when you were—"*

"Playing the good soldier on the other side of the galaxy?"

His own voice was wry, but gentle and understanding as she cut herself off, his likeness lifting Padmé's hand to brush a kiss across her knuckles. *"I'm glad you decided to wait."*

"That still doesn't answer my question; a boy or a— oh! Hello Threepio."

The droid came a stop, the holo shifting slightly as the focus shifted and he appeared to bow. *"My Lady; Master Anakin; it is always good to see you."*

"You too, Threepio; what have you there?"

"Breakfast, sir; Mistress Padmé's nutritional requirements have shifted somewhat these last months."

He and Padmé had shared an amused look at the understatement from the droid, their intertwined hands dropping back to her belly.

Vader reached out to pause the holo, starting at the image of himself, Padmé's reiteration about him not being Anakin suddenly jumping out at him. Was *this* what she thought of when she thought of him? These small snatches of memory; the bits and pieces that she saw and not what she'd experienced with him on Tatooine? Or when she'd seen him after he'd killed Durge or Dooku?

He'd already resolved to treat her carefully, but this... this gave him a new idea. If he could see through Threepio's eyes how he'd once been, Artoo would also have memories. Would watching them give him a chance to see himself through her eyes? He'd already deduced that she responded better to him the more he acted like the man she remembered and not the man he'd often shielded her from.

Was this yet another way to ensure he could perhaps... *pretend* to be the man she remembered; to give her what she wanted? Resting his chin in the palm of his hand, he drummed his fingers on his cheekbone.

Acting like Anakin; he'd *been* Anakin.

How hard could it be?

Reaching out, he left his chin where it was and resumed watching the holo, his attention not really on the words, but the image of himself and his wife. The image of the man she still claimed he wasn't. He watched the holo several times, cutting out the audio, noting the soft touches, the caresses, he'd once used on her — the ones she'd once shifted towards and now resisted.

Continuing to drum his fingers on his cheek, he watched several other brief byplays between him and Padmé, each showcasing how she'd once yearned for his touch — and just how besotted he'd looked; which, he supposed, was the truth of both his feelings and focus. Few things caught and held his attention like Padmé. Not even being a Jedi had been enough to distract him from her; no matter where he'd been...

Shaking his head to rid it of the memories, Vader straightened and fast forwarded it through the recordings. Later he could look at himself with his loving wife; for now, he needed something to save her sanity.

The next few recordings were of Padmé and various senators he knew she was familiar and friendly with; he skipped these too. The next time one caught his attention was when Artoo beeped something and he paused to listen, smiling faintly as Artoo made another sound and Threepio shushed him.

"Well, he is under a lot of stress, Artoo."

He skipped ahead and stumbled upon a small gem; Padmé speaking with Threepio, expressing her concern for him, her worry about the mission to Mustafar that the Chancellor had assigned him.

That discussion, which he'd skipped past, had been one of the last times she'd embraced him as the loving wife he so remembered; one of the last times she'd clung to him with complete trust — before Obi-wan had gone and ruined everything by telling her about the temple. His blood boiled at the thought and he skipped the next section, not wanting to hear her speak with Obi-Wan, if in fact Threepio had been present for the conversation.

One day, perhaps, but not now; he needed to find whatever Artoo had said was buried in the memory banks and he doubted it had anything to do with Obi-Wan. He jumped ahead in the time stamps, deliberately skipping the next set, which had to be Padmé's decision, and trip, to meet him on Mustafar.

The buzzing static of corrupted data met him next as he ran through a report from Toydaria to collect details, only half listening.

He frowned as the odd word came through before more buzzing and more static. Corrupted data was prevalent over the course of the next couple of hours with the odd comment by Threepio coming through, a question from Padmé wanting to know *something* that was cut off and very little actual data.

Threepio's memory wipe had been selective to a certain section of his memory banks, a specific time frame, and Vader found it frustrating as he played back the odd clip with sound. Snatches of conversations and scenes; nothing that could be useful — nothing that might have the impact Artoo suggested or even identify the speakers beyond Threepio himself or other droids.

Realizing he wasn't going to get anything from the straight files, especially from the timeframe Artoo had suggested, without some serious reconstruction, Vader set aside his reports. Pulling up a new file on his console, he fed the information from Threepio's memory core into it and, using a program he had for similar repairs in starship computers as a template, began writing the necessary code that would, hopefully, patch together the memories and make them watchable.

Flipping on his comlink to Artoo's frequency as he typed in the first modified code segment, he waited for Artoo's acknowledgement before speaking.

"I need your processors, Artoo; I'm in my office."

The affirmative beep was all he waited for before flipping it off and going back to finish the line of coding. He checked it against the template, frowned, and went back to rewrite part of it. Laboring over the coding for several minutes, he was relieved when Artoo trundled into the office with a querying beep.

"I need your help with this, buddy; Threepio's memories are so corrupted I won't be able to find what you said was in there without repairing them first."

Another query.

"You're the one who said whatever I'm looking for was in there; is it a piece of the corrupted data, Artoo? Is it something I'm going to have to reconstruct?"

There was an almost scoffing sound of the droid followed by a chatter of a laugh.

"Just because something drops in your lap doesn't make it any less valuable; you could at least give me a hint!"

A distinctly negative sound followed the little droid turning his dome back and forth.

Vader frowned. "Even though *you* had no trouble breaking through the corruption to reconstruct Threepio's memories doesn't mean I will, Artoo. Give me a hand with it, would you? Without your help, there's no guarantee I'll even *find* what it is you want me to." Much as it rankle Vader to admit it, it was true; the hint wasn't enough.

Artoo made a noise and Vader shook his head. "If there is something there that will help Padmé, you want it as much as I do."

It was a cheap shot but he wasn't above manipulating his friend to get what he wanted and it had the effect Vader was hoping for. Artoo trundled over, opening one of the hatches that would allow him to be attached to Vader's console. Hooking up the droid up to interface with the program, Vader initialized the hook up and granted Artoo complete access to the console.

Lines of code appeared and shifted, seeming to rewrite themselves and Artoo posed a query. He could write the program for Vader, but he wasn't about to and said so.

Stubborn droid; it figured.

“All right, all right, Artoo; I’ll do my part. Just tell me if I’m on the wrong track, okay? I haven’t done this kind of thing in a long time. I wouldn’t want to erase something you think is important.”

Artoo signaled his willingness to help and Vader set to the task with grim determination; much as he found the coding aspects of programming tedious, in this case it was essential. He *would* recover the files and, with Artoo’s cooperation, write the code for the program he would need to do it would take a fraction of the time to write.

The sooner he was able to delve unhindered into Threepio’s memories, the better.

While he worked, Vader presented Artoo with another dilemma and had the astromech call on his own unaltered memory files to play back some of his interactions with Padmé from before she’d become pregnant. It wasn’t distracting and he listened and watched with only half an ear, but it was... educational.

“I don’t know what I’m looking for in here either, Artoo,” he informed the droid as he watched a holo of himself and Padmé, smiling faintly when she’d pulled back from his kiss within the holo but not removed herself from his reach. That had been back when they’d still been hiding their relationship from Threepio, but not Artoo.

Artoo beeped a query, replaying the image again.

“Padmé responds better to me, more like her old self, when I’m acting closer to this,” Vader explained as he waved his hand at the holo.

The blatted insult was far from complimentary.

“I *do* hold onto my temper!”

A complex series of whistles and beeps followed before Artoo showed another holo, this one of Padmé’s recent time with him where she fought his embrace. Another series of scolding and then Artoo showed Vader the holo he’d been watching with such interest.

The contrast, the dynamic, between him and his wife was readily apparent.

“I’d figured that out for myself, thanks Artoo.”

Another query practically matched his clipped response.

Vader exhaled, turning back to the program determinedly. “I don’t know yet. I’m trying to be what she needs, but she’s stubborn. I’m not giving up on her, on us; I am going to have to watch myself around her though. No more out bursts; she can’t handle them.”

Artoo was silent for a long minute before he let out a soft, sad wail.

“I know buddy,” Vader patted his dome. “It’s not going to be easy, but I think I’m up to the challenge, don’t you?”

The question was rhetorical and Vader didn’t really expect an answer; still, the droid’s silence was almost ominous against the soft whirring and clicking as he worked on the program. Either Artoo didn’t believe he could do it, do didn’t think he should. Either way,

Vader dismissed it; he *would* get his wife back, no matter what it took. Failure wasn't an option

evening

"Please eat something, my Lady," Threepio urged, offering Padmé a plate of cut fruits. "You have had nothing since yesterday morning."

"I'm not hungry, Threepio."

"Mistress Padmé, your body requires nutrition to function properly," Threepio wheedled. "Not unlike my power requirements. It would be unwise to—"

"Threepio."

The droid made a sound as he was cut off and then withdrew the plate from near her hand. Vader frowned from his position behind them as she made no move to touch it, despite the droid's insistence. "You should listen to him."

Padmé glanced towards Vader, who was leaning with both hands on the back of the sofa and watching her, before looking back to the viewport. "Or what; you'll make good on your threat?"

Vader straightened; there'd been no heat in her words, no fire, but there was also no resignation. It was as if she were an emotional void, simply processing words and not emotions. "If I have to. I doubt you'd enjoy being strapped to a bed in the medical ward."

"At least it would be a change of scenery," she returned flatly. "The corridors of this deck aren't nearly as interesting as they once were."

"Padmé—"

"If you're going to keep threatening me with it, why don't you just do it?"

"I'd rather have you eat."

"And I'd rather have my children safe with me and away from you."

Vader watch as her hands curled around the edge of the viewport. He shifted his position, able to see her reflection; her expression was devoid of emotion, as if she couldn't summon the physical aspects of the anger that he could feel but didn't see. This emotionless woman was not the passionate creature who'd been sharing his quarters the last month, or the woman he'd married, and he chose his words to deliberately get a reaction. "I told you I'd find them."

"And I don't want you looking," turning, the words were level as she pinned him with a glare.

He was gratified to see the first sparks of temper flaring in her eyes and crossed his arms over his chest. "So you've said; repeatedly."

"And it makes no difference, does it? What I want, what I—"

"It makes every difference," he contradicted, cutting her off even as he kept a tight grasp on his temper. "It's you that can't decide what you really want, Padmé."

"How dare you!"

He smiled faintly, tightly, his eyes glittering with suppressed anger; the blue irises now yellow-tinted green. "You've said it repeatedly; you want our children here with you, but you don't want them around *me*. You can't have one without the other."

"I've also said I want my freedom, or did you *conveniently* forget that fact?"

"Whatever freedom you want, you'll find it here with me," he returned evenly, his fist clenching where she couldn't see it next to his chest underneath his elbow. "You're my wife. Your place is beside me and me alone; *nothing* is going to change that fact."

"My place..." she choked, shaking her head, and turned back to the viewport, not seeming to have the energy to argue with him. Or perhaps she'd finally seen his point of view. "Go away."

"I'm not going anywhere; Threepio is right. You need to eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"Somehow I doubt that; I can hear your stomach rumbling from here."

"You need to have your hearing checked," she snapped back, her own anger coming through finally though she did little more than lift her gaze to his in her reflection. "I'm not a child or one of your soldiers to be told what to do and when. I don't want your help; I don't *need* your help. Just leave me alone!"

Something he couldn't do; on any level. "You won't eat, you won't sleep; if you're denying yourself to spite me, it's not going to work."

She was silent, not responding to the implied threat; she knew what he'd do if things didn't change. They both did. And Vader had about reached the end of the line; another day or two of this and he'd have no choice but to do as he'd promised and Padmé would be given no choice but to submit. A part of him was tempted to do it anyway but to take that choice from her wasn't something he relished; it would, he was starting to understand, simply push her further away from him.

That left him few choices, something he wasn't used to. As Vader, he was accustomed to saying what was necessary and having it accomplished. For two years he'd had absolute power and discretion at his fingertips and in the last month, since Padmé had rejoined him, he'd been forced to rethink that point of view.

He didn't like it.

That didn't mean he wouldn't do it though; anything to get her well and back to the woman she'd been. Somewhere within the hard, broken woman was the woman he'd married, and he intended to reach her. He considered several options as he stood watching her, his fist flexing within his glove, tightening and relaxing; a twitch she couldn't see. The course of action he settled on was rash, inadvisable, and would hurt him even as it saved her; something he knew would appeal to her for all it personally stung.

Before he could change his mind, he modulated his tone and spoke. “I’ll make you a deal, Padmé.”

She stiffened and Vader knew he’d caught her attention even though she said nothing. All he had to do was keep it; spark some interest and he was willing to do, to *say*, just about anything at this point. That included what she wanted to hear, if that’s what it took.

“Every full meal or hearty snack you eat will be an hour I don’t spend searching for Luke and Leia.”

She whirled, eyes wide, disbelief etched across her features. “*What?*”

With his clenched fist still hidden, his anger at the *hope* in her eyes translated into the servos in it softly whining with the power of his grip. He had no intention of honoring the bargain, but the confirmation of that hope cut deeply. “You heard me.”

“Why? Why offer me this when it’s what you want too?”

“Do you want me to stop searching or not Padmé?”

“*Yes!*”

“Then what have you to lose by agreeing?”

What indeed. He could see the question in her eyes, the way she weighed the sincerity of his comment. Something in his posture or expression, perhaps his gaze, gave him away because her lips tightened into a thin line. “How do I know you’ll keep your word?”

“Statistically speaking, Mistress Padmé, Master Anakin has—”

“He’s *not* Anakin, Threepio,” her eyes closed, resigned, and she turned away as if the will to fight had suddenly left her. “I don’t want your bargain, *Dark Lord*; just leave me alone.”

“Then you leave me no choice, Padmé.”

She didn’t respond, seeming to withdraw into herself and Vader *felt* the servos in his hand about to give out, forcing him to unclench his fist. He switched hands until he lost all feeling in the other, narrowing his gaze on her straight posture.

Artoo toddled from the doorway to his office, a caution Vader would be wise to follow; a caution he’d *better* follow, and he shot a glare at his little mechanical *friend*. His gaze was brought up short by a holo that Padmé wouldn’t have been able to see at her angle; one of the two of them intertwined in a mutual and loving embrace. His grip slackened, his arms falling away from their guarded position.

The silent reprimand from the droid was clear; be what she *needed*.

Exhaling, Vader deliberately shielded his anger, burying it, forcing it down deep within himself. Artoo’s reminder was timely; he needed to try harder. Stepping towards his wife, he watched her stiffen as he drew near — aware of him even now. Deliberately ignoring it, Vader braced his hands on either side of hers and lowered his chin to her shoulder, his chest pressing into her back.

Padmé jerked, but there was nowhere for her to go as he corralled her against the edge of the viewport. “Go away.”

"Name your price, my love," he offered softly. "What will it take to get you to eat?"

"My freedom."

"A price within reason; I'm not letting you go."

Her shoulder sagged; he was immovable. "I want nothing from you then."

Vader tilted his head, brushing his lips along the column of her neck. "Nothing?" His words were soft, suggestive. "Not even the oblivion I know you crave? The oblivion only *I* can provide?"

Her elbow to the chest caught him by surprise, though it shouldn't have, and he straightened. Not releasing his touch on her completely, the end result was him being pressed against her back from hip to shoulder, her scent wrapping cloyingly about him. His fingers flexed on the viewport sill and the image of how she'd been yesterday when he'd caught her on the tail end of another nightmare was suddenly strong. He fought the urge to hold her properly.

Fought it and lost.

His hands slipped over hers, sliding upwards until she was caught against his chest, his hands wrapped tightly about hers, his fingers touching opposite shoulders. She tried to shake him off, to push away his touch, but Vader wouldn't let her.

Padmé stood in his embrace fighting the need and comfort he offered. Part of her yearned to take it, to simply lean back and accept what he offered; to give into the despair that crushed her little by little every day, every *minute*, her children were gone. It was the same emotional rollercoaster she'd been riding since her capture, and before it, and the need for something, *anything* was strong — even from him.

"You can lean on me," he offered softly, his lips moving against her hair near her ear, his tone soothing and supportive, showing none of the anger roiling through his system.

Her need was strong enough, blatant enough, her posture started to ease even before she was consciously aware of her decision to reach for what he offered, if only for a moment. His words had been soothing, his presence an echo of the man she so dearly missed and she closed her eyes, tilting her head back ever so slightly. It was a motion of surrender, however subtle, and Vader relished it.

Finally!

His grip on her tightened as he sensed her capitulation from the pliancy in her body. He dared to brush a kiss over the tip of her ear, one that made her shiver. His words were soft when he spoke next, a promise; a pledge. "I promise I won't break you."

It was the wrong thing to say and she went rigid in his grasp.

"Let me go; *now*."

"Padmé—"

"Now," she repeated, her fists clenching, her whole posture suddenly hostile.

"I'm only trying to—"

"I know what you're trying to do," she retorted savagely, tearing at his arms, suddenly desperate to be free of them. Inside her head, she was berating herself for falling for such a blatant ploy. He wasn't Anakin; couldn't *be* Anakin! "I know; and I'm not going to..." His grip didn't slacken until her nails dug into the flesh at the top of his glove, yanking his hands off her shoulders with almost frantic emphasis. "I can't... I won't..."

She fought him and Vader's arms dropped as he took a step back, the sting of another rejection very akin to the slap she'd last laid on him. Padmé needed him and either couldn't or wouldn't admit it — to either of them. He could see it, *feel* it, and she was fighting it with resources she didn't have, making her more vulnerable to the nightmarish episodes that plagued her.

Stepping away, he narrowed his gaze on her, glanced back to the droids, took a deep breath and suppressed the simmering emotional pot that only seemed to bubble closer to the surface with each rejection. He only wanted to help her, why couldn't she see that? Why couldn't she accept it?

She whirled on him, once again prepped for battle, but even now he could see her energy waning as she slid away and out of reach. "It would take more than the likes of *you* to break me!"

"I'm not trying to break you Padmé," he returned evenly; how could she so misconstrue an innocent comment? He deliberately changed the topic back to their original discussion, knowing it was a safer topic than the one she was on. "But you'll break yourself if you don't eat something and, if you haven't started eating regularly in two days, I'll have no choice but to make good on my promise."

"Why wait?"

"Because you *used* to be a rational woman," he retorted dryly, making a gesture towards her with one hand. His expression tightened when she flinched, as if expecting him to harm her. "You don't even have the energy to fight with me right now."

"Then go away and leave me be."

"Two days, Padmé."

Her lips tightened and Vader decided he'd had enough for the moment. Any longer and he'd lose the temper he's so carefully managed for this conversation, the simmering hurt and frustration of her inability to trust him having added fuel onto a dangerously explosive base. More and he *might* do something unwise. With a sharp nod, satisfied he'd made his point, he turned on his heel and swept from the room back towards his office — from there he intended to get to the bridge and look for incompetence; it would do wonders to release the fury simmering within him.

Behind him, Threepio shuffled towards Padmé. "Are you certain you will not eat something, my Lady? I am still in possession of your nutritional requirements and Artoo has been kind enough to—"

"I'm—"

Artoo let out a scold that made Vader smile grimly as the door closed behind him, cutting off Padmé's reply, but he knew that tone of beeping. Padmé was about to get a lecture on her

health from a concerned droid who never took 'no' for an answer.

He laughed shortly, once and despite the context it felt surprisingly good. He wasn't the only one Artoo was giving hell. That thought on his mind, he swept from his office pausing only to collect his cloak and swing it around his shoulders.

Time for a little recreational butt kicking to take the edge off his temper.

The crew would soon learn as Vader's black temper increased with his wife's back and forth moods, that mistakes, no matter how small, would not be tolerated. He expected perfection — and got it.

Month Twenty Five, Day 6 PEF

I know I said more posts, but I think I'm just going to go with "Longer" posts... bang for the buck as it were. If I'm inspired, you guys will get the odd 'double update' but unlikely since I write and then review and I'm my own editor again for the moment, so bear with me :)

I think this will be a controversial post in some ways... we'll see.

Chapter 69

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Five, Day Six PEF

Morning

The next morning, Vader left his suite for his office on the bridge, stopping to speak with the General. All around, men were industriously working to ensure the perfection Vader had demanded the night before was provided. They'd already watched three of their number slain to prove the point and no one wished to join them.

"Your report, General."

"Ah, Lord Vader." The General turned with an unexpected smile. "We have good news, my Lord."

"Have you succeeded in securing a foothold?"

"Yes, sir. In fact, with Lady Ventress on the ground, you could say we've ensured it. She's managed to eliminate a good deal of their anti aircraft fire and we've begun landing the heavier equipment to reinforce Torrent and the 501st as they set up the garrison; they've been most effective. Reports from the ground are promising; very promising."

"They know better than to disappoint me," Vader informed the General pleasantly, the implied threat in his words and the glitter of his eyes wiping the smile from the General's cheeks and washing his face of all color. "Carry on, General."

Turning, Vader headed for his office on the bridge to resume working on the program that would decrypt and restore the information from Threepio's memory banks. Artoo didn't need to join him and was, he suspected, back in the workshop trying to finish the upgrades on Vader's fighter.

Plugging the disk into the program, he opened the data file to complete the code. It would take an hour or so to complete, Vader having been too on edge but tired by the time he'd retired for the night to finish the delicate work.

While he worked, adding lines of code and deleting the useless, he pressed the audio on the file to play, having skipped ahead of the corrupted data. After an evening of listening to

Threepio say ‘Oh Dear’ a bunch of times, he was looking forward to some insight into Padmé’s group activities. Perhaps even a glimpse into the Alliance leadership, or at least a name or two, that would give him some place to start.

He was just finishing the last lines of the code, inputting the last series of data lines, when an unexpected sound came from the holo recorder.

Padmé’s laugh.

He’d heard a genuine laugh from her for the first time in almost two years barely a month ago, and had been hoping every day since to hear it again to no avail. And here, on holo record, she laughed? Vader reached out to pause the playback and finished the program, shutting it down and copying it to another disc before turning to the record.

Punching in the commands, he called up the holo display — but what he found was something he’d hoped never to see.

Padmé frozen image stood next to a man, her hand in his caught in midair, as if fending off an attack. Except she was smiling, a teasing look on her face despite the haunted sadness even the holo couldn’t hide in her eyes. For all his focus tended to be on Padmé, it was the man who caught his attention.

Taller than Padmé, almost his own height, the man was very nondescript. He could have fit in and gotten lost on any number of worlds. His plain features were lit with a teasing smile of his own, the quirk to his lips holding a hint of devilish mischief. The man had a regulation hair cut that had since grown wild, wiry build and comfortable clothing with a mess of pockets for odds and ends.

A wave of his hand started the holo again and Padmé’s laugh rang out through his office, sticking in Vader’s gut like a knife.

“That’s just awful,” she told the man with a grin, obviously not meaning it, her eyes on the holo projection Vader could *just* see.

Threepio, a Gamorrean and a creature with pincers and a nose that hit the ground caught in some kind of lewd tantric pose. If he’d been in a mood to be entertained, he’d have laughed too. As it was, he didn’t find it, or the way the man’s hand had curled around Padmé’s as she admonished him, remotely funny.

“I’m supposed to be planning our next raid.”

“You work too much,” came the reply, the man twisting his fingers through Padmé’s with a familiarity that made Vader’s hand clench. He didn’t notice as the items on his desk and shelves began to vibrate. *“It’s my duty as your friend and most trusted advisor to ensure you relax.”*

“Max...” her tone was almost scolding, her next words lost under the breaking of glass as a couple of priceless antiques shattered on the shelf behind Vader and he pushed to his feet.

The holo image of his wife and Max, the slicer she’d betrayed him with, continued to play even as his hand shot out as if to push the other man away. Max’s imaged moved through Vader’s hand as if it wasn’t there, stepping close to Padmé to turn her towards the holo image the slicer had obviously tampered with to make her grin.

“Mistress Padmé,” Threepio’s voice cut into the holo image, giving Padmé and Max pause, but didn’t separate them. “*Might I be of service in this endeavor?*”

“*Maybe later, Threepio,*” Padmé agreed.

While she spoke to the droid, Max turned her towards a nearby stool as her expression started to lose its amusement, the cloud of her ever present sorrow bearing down on her. “*You need to relax; you’ll work yourself into an early grave,*” the slicer admonished, pulling up another stool, sliding in behind her to bracket her hips with his thighs as his hands slid onto her shoulders.

Padmé’s eyes closed as she leaned back into—

The image suddenly vanished as Vader’s hand came down on the holo display, smashing the player to pieces. It had been a fairly harmless holo all things considered, and if he hadn’t known they’d been more than friends, he’d have likely given it little thought. But he *knew* there was more to it from Padmé’s own admission and Threepio’s confirmation; the bounder had been putting the moves on *his* wife — and she’d been succumbing to them!

He didn’t even pause to retrieve his disk as he stormed from his office and back onto the bridge. His long legs took him back to the viewport, the anger and rage simmering within his system ready to detonate in a cataclysmic outpouring. control was hard to find, but find it he did, shielding his emotional turmoil from his crew as he turned to the General, his tone clipped.

“General.”

“My Lord?”

“Recall Ventress,” his voice was lethally calm, almost pleasantly so; deadly and quiet, his eyes flashing orange. “Have her contact me the moment she’s back on board.”

“Yes, Lord Vader.”

With a nod, Vader swept from the bridge, casually tossing aside two deck officers who didn’t move out of his way fast enough. They went careening forcefully into a nearby bulkhead, forgotten even as he stalked past. Shaken, but still alive despite the flight, they scurried away before Vader noticed, sending word on ahead that the Dark Lord was on the move.

Afternoon

The summons back to the *Exactor* during her stint on planet was not something Asajj had been expecting. As Vader’s apprentice she couldn’t deny it, though she did delay from morning to afternoon when she heard a rumor of a Jedi having popped up during one of the battles and had thought to confront them.

With no luck.

She’d tracked the Jedi to a small hamlet of resistance and then the trail had just... *vanished*.

Not daring to delay any longer, she'd climbed into her fighter and, as ordered, returned to see her Master. Clearing her landing with the flight crew, she landed in the designated area and popped the hatch, inhaling the recycled air with a grimace. It was always strange to be back on the *Exactor* after being somewhere that had *real* air.

Ignoring it, she climbed from her fighter, ignoring the nearby flight crew, and stretched. Unable to delay the inevitable, she reached for her comlink and flipped it on. "Master."

"*Ventress.*" the way he said her name made her eyes narrow and her defenses kick in; he was *not* pleased about something. "*You're late.*"

"I was following up on a lead regarding a Jedi rumor," she informed him smoothly, telling him the truth as much as she could; she wasn't about to admit to a sense of trepidation upon returning.

"*And?*"

"I lost her," Asajj admitted.

"*The training salle; ten minutes. Bring your weapons.*"

Asajj blinked at the curt order, her gaze narrowing on the comlink as it clicked off, a simmering rage starting in her gut. The order was reminiscent of *other* orders he'd once issued but surely with Padmé on board he wouldn't...

He...

She shook off the thought. Of course he wouldn't; he was trying to get back in his wife's good graces

Secretly smug about the fact she'd caused so much dissension by revealing her role in Vader's bed to Padmé, she'd never admit to either of them — or consciously to herself — that a part of her had *enjoyed* the sessions; or that she'd actively instigated one by her defiance simply to see him lose some of that precious control. Vader wasn't easy to manipulate and she took her victories where she could find them. Even if it meant suffering degradation at his hands, Vader's own had been worth it; she wasn't the only one to have lost control.

Still...

Unwilling to risk his wrath, she stopped briefly by her quarters to change before clipping her sabers at her waist and heading for the training salle. This summons shouldn't have been a surprise, she reminded herself firmly as she rounded a corner. Vader had dubbed her his apprentice; this was likely another training session. Sessions that had distinctly tapered off since he'd begun making use of her skills as a tracker and in other areas — and since Padmé's capture. She reached the training salle eleven minutes later, palming open the door and stepping in.

The hum of an ignited lightsaber met her and she whipped her own up on purely instinctive reflex, barely catching the vicious overhead chop between the V of her blades, the single pulsing blade a bare hand span away from her face.

"You're late."

A harsh kick to her ribs sent her flying to the side and Asajj flicked off her sabers as she struck the ground, rolling, and then came up again, her lightsabers flaring back to life. She caught the follow up attack with her left hand, striking out with her right and her eyes widened as Vader didn't block the blade, but instead jumped it, going almost straight vertical and earned herself a kick to the face as she blocked the downwards chop aimed at her head.

She reeled, spinning, and brought both blades around in a dual arc in an attempt to strike him.

Vader caught both blades on his singular one, the raw fury in his gaze catching her off guard as the power behind his strikes registered in the block, her arms shaking with the impact. A vestige of fear crept in around the edges of her confidence; Vader was barely in control, angry, and hadn't called her here for what she'd suspected.

This was no training session, no sparring session; this was *punishment*.

Only, she didn't know what for; she'd not failed him of late... unless it was in the objective to secure Max, but it wasn't his style to postpone punishment. If he'd intended to make her pay for *only* retrieving Threepio, he'd have done it in the detention area. "Have I failed you, Master?"

"I expect punctuality, Ventress," he informed her coolly, throwing her blocking sabers aside and diving in with a lightning quick series of jabs that put her back on her heels.

Moving her feet quickly to get away, she blocked and spun for all she was worth. Anakin had been a challenge; Vader letting loose out classed her.

"No excuses."

If she's known *this* was waiting for her, she wouldn't have gone by her chambers; she'd have been early. Vader had been looking for an excuse and he'd found one; she'd *given* him one. She parried another slice at her head, ducked and weaved over and under a combination, lashing out with her own blades as she could, only to be halted at every turn.

A dual overhand chop was blocked, parried and riposte, forcing her to do the same as she backed away. Vader kept with her, his single blade weaving up and back about him like a shield, protecting him from the lightning swiftness of her brief counter attack. It lasted no more than a quick series of thrusts and blocks before she was on the defensive again.

The rage simmering within Vader permeated the training salle, and Asajj began to wonder as she was again sent sprawling by a kick, this one to the center of her back where it could — and likely would — leave the imprint of his boot across her kidneys. The simmer of her own rage fueled her speed as she whirled, dropped and rolled.

Her lightsabers came arcing over as she spread her arms wide, spun to her feet and lunged back at Vader. Vader slammed her lightsabers in a one two combination, not allowing her to bring them in, and brought his knee up into her face, smashing her nose as she regained her feet and it sent her sprawling, her eyes crossing momentarily.

Instinct guided her movements as she fell away and back, her lightsabers crossing before her face as she struggled to see. The crackle of her blades contacting Vader's was amplified with the force behind the slamming impact of his single blade on hers as he drove hers downwards.

With a cry, she stretched for the Force and, as usual in his volatile presence, struggled to grasp it, the power seeming to slip away from her fingers; as if the Force wouldn't come to her call because its chosen messenger wouldn't *allow* it. Her arms began to shake, the lightsabers dipping back towards her face and coalescing in Vader's glowing yellow eyes. He deliberately pushed her back towards the mat, the blades coming closer, ever closer, to her face.

"You disappoint me, Ventress," he told her evenly, his tone at odds with his actions as her arms began to give way under his fury. "I had hoped by now you'd be more of a challenge."

She let out another cry, this one filled with her own anger, and locked her arms where they were. The tips of her lightsabers dipped above her head, the sound of the mats sizzling as they brushed the fabric echoing loudly her ears. Knowing she couldn't beat him in a strength contest, she curled, attempting to kick him some place sensitive below his waist and forced his retreat, rolling to regain her footing and faced him at the ready.

As she gained her feet, Vader let loose with a mocking laugh and a wave of force lightning, making her scream, her muscles going into a spasm and her lightsabers dropped to the mats harmlessly. Smoking, her body unable to resist the onslaught, she was caught at his mercy. Vader lifted her in a Force grip, cutting off her air supply and sent her with a wave of his hand into a nearby crossbeam.

Crashing to the mat, Asajj gasped, pushing to her hands and knees and forced herself to speak. "Master." Her voice rasped but she forced it not to break; she refused to give him *that* satisfaction. "How have I failed you?"

"You've been slacking, Ventress," he told her, waiting, but Asajj could tell his patience was feigned. For some reason he was set on throwing her around the room like a broken doll. "You have sloppy execution and lack finish. You've not been keeping up with your training; I'm surprised you've been able to get anywhere near the Jedi, let alone defeat them."

"Jedi are weak," she spat, glaring at him as she forced her body to respond and pushed to her feet; stretching out one hand, she reached for the Force to call her weapons to her. Yet, even with Vader across the room, she couldn't focus enough and her jaw clenched in time with her hand as the lightsaber's handle quivered but didn't come to her. Blood streaked her face from her broken nose, clogging her mouth and breathing passage. "Stupid and complacent, Jedi are far less adept than I!"

"No more than you," Vader's eyes glittered as she glared at him. "Pick up your sabers; show me just how *adept* you are."

Asajj gritted her teeth, felt the blood in her mouth threatening to choke her, and spat it out to the side. Stretching out her hand again, she reached for the sabers, *willing* them back to her hand. They shook, as if wanting to respond to her call, inching towards her.

"How very impressive," he crossed his arms over his chest, smirking; watching. "I can certainly see why you think the Jedi should fear you."

Gritting her teeth, Asajj stretch her arm out further, reaching... *seeking*... willing the sabers to her hand. They inched forward and sweat broke out on her brow, beading with the strain, as she struggled to grasp the suddenly elusive power that was usually at her fingertips.

“Time’s up.”

Ducking away as Vader came back in swinging, her lightsabers leapt into the air, streaking towards her as her desperation and anger fueled her contact to the Force, the handles sliding into her hands even as Vader’s blade came streaking in. Her lightsabers burst into life, clashing against Vader’s and trapping it between them just a hand span from her chest before she pushed her blades out towards him, sweeping her foot towards his ankles.

Vader, to her surprise, didn’t retreat as he jumped over the attack, never breaking the saber lock.

Switching from a dual grip on his lightsaber hilt to a single grasp, his right hand shot out. Sliding around her neck and digging into her flesh, the robotic fingers tightened mercilessly. Pressing forward, he ensured her blades were both engaged as he drove the sabers towards her chest with a grip. He cut off her breathing with a tight grip even as the blades came closer, his eyes fairly glowing amber-orange.

“You require more training, Ventress,” he told her, dangerously calm. “I sense your intentions; you’re no match for me.”

Her need to breath had her dropping a saber to claw at his fingers, but Vader wasn’t done with her yet; he waited, squeezing mercilessly until she dropped the other saber, unable to beat his defenses. Her hands clawing at his, Asajj saw her death in his gaze, gasping and wheezing as she struggled to draw a full breath.

He was the last thing she saw as the blackness crept in around the edges of her vision, the cruel twist of his lips leaving her but one regret: that she hadn’t killed him and his backstabbing wife before he’d gotten the chance to kill her.

Vader entered his quarters around the dinner house to the sound of Padmé and Threepio in the kitchenette, the droid making some delighted comment about the quality and variety of the supplies available to him. Unable to resist, Vader headed for the kitchenette and found, much to his surprise, that Padmé was working her way through a modestly filled plate.

From the look of it, they’d made dinner and Padmé had taken his ‘advice’; proof she had no wish to be hooked to a nutrient drip? Vader liked to think so. His wife had no desire to be even more helpless in this situation than she already was

“I hardly think you need to make so much, Threepio,” she commented dryly. “Even if he joins us, we’re not going to be able to eat all of that.”

“Then I will ensure your guards have a decent meal, my Lady,” the droid replied huffily. “It is unseemly that they need to stand guard without any kind of—”

“It’s their job, Threepio. They eat in the mess for a reason.”

Threepio huffed, pouring some of his concoction into a couple of mugs on a nearby tray; neither he nor Padmé noted Vader’s blood spattered presence beyond the doorway. “Job or not, there is no call for them to be uncomfortable. A restoring drink—”

“Threepio.”

Vader grinned at the exasperated tolerance in Padmé's voice for Threepio's consideration; after his work out in the training sale, he was in a much better mood to appreciate it. Still, he made no move to draw their attention to his presence as he rubbed bare fingers across his cheek and it came away bloody. Not willing to risk their questions *just* yet, he turned and headed for the 'fresher.

A quick shower and change and he'd join them.

In good humor, he whistled an off key tune through his shower, scrubbing down carefully to ensure the blood spatters on his face and in his hair were removed. Slicking away the sweat from his skin, he soaped his hair twice before rising down and toweling dry, exiting the 'fresher with nothing but the towel wrapped about his waist.

And stopped.

Padmé had stepped out of the kitchenette at the same time he'd left the 'fresher and her gaze was on his; or more specifically, on the expanse of bare flesh above *and* below the towel. His hand tightened in reflex on the towel to keep it from slipping — and then slackened. There was no need for modesty between them; it might just remind her of everything she was denying herself; denying them.

"You're back."

"And you look so happy to see me." A quick, teasing grin slid across his lips at her comment; it had been too breathless, too sharp, for it to be anything but complimentary. "Did you enjoy your dinner?"

Padmé stiffened at his tone; laid back and teasing. Instantly putting her on her guard when he sounded so relaxed. So much like Anakin. "It was fine."

"I overheard Threepio saying he was going to take something to the guards when I came in?"

"Caf," she offered shortly. "He thinks it's inhumane to keep them on guard like you do."

Vader arched his eyebrows, crossing his arms over his chest even as the towel slipped a little, Padmé's gaze dropping to it before she quickly and deliberately looked away. "Two hour watches are hardly inhumane and it is their job."

"I told him that," she looked everywhere but at him, her posture stiff. "Threepio can be stubborn when it comes to matters of what he perceives is protocol. Maybe you should have a word with him."

"He's always been a fuss; why should I interfere if it makes him happy?"

Her lips thinned and she went impossibly more rigid, as if his good mood was an affront to her sensibilities. "Why indeed. I..." she glanced back his way and, to his surprise, slight color flooded highlighted her cheekbones. Seeing him *naked* hadn't made her blush so much, yet here she was seeing him in a precariously wrapped towel and she couldn't look at him.

Interesting.

Very Interesting.

He'd have given a lot of credits to know just what images and thoughts were passing through her mind at that moment — and if they were similar at all to the ones that erupted in his own. Despite the pleasant distraction, he deliberately turned the conversation back to where it had started; her last rejection, despite his rigorous workout, still stung.

"Have *you* an objection to him bringing them caf, Padmé?" He deliberately kept his tone teasing, watching her carefully. "Or is it the freedom he's given you object to?"

She shot him a glare. "I *object* to the fact you're keeping me hostage and, while I'm here, whatever freedoms you give *him* aren't freedoms at all! And I... I..." she turned her back suddenly. "I *refuse* to speak with you dressed like that!"

Dinner had agreed with her.

Much improved in spirit and energy despite the chronic fatigue and lack of nourishment, her fighting spirit seemed to have recovered some. Vader's attention was drawn from Padmé's retreating figure to the sound of the door opening and Threepio stepping back through from the hallway, tray in hand with empty cups.

"Oh! Lord Vader, I did not hear you return!"

"Threepio. What's with the tray?"

"Caf for the guards, sir, I did not think you would mind. They stand at their posts for hours without refreshments and I—"

To Threepio's surprise, Vader chuckled. "It's all right, Threepio; they're there for Padmé's protection and convenience. I can't have her wandering around unescorted even if the deck is mine. Too many people know she's here and I can't risk retribution against me through her."

"I understand, sir. Perhaps if you gave her some form of self protection she would be better equipped to—"

"That's what they are, Threepio. Giving Padmé a weapon is out of the question."

"I assure you, Lord Vader, Mistress Padmé is as accomplished a shot as she ever was. Why, she has in fact—"

"You don't need to tell *methat*," Vader chuckled again, but this time there was an edge to it as he responded wryly, turning to head for his room. "It's why she's not allowed to carry one."

"I don't understand, sir."

Pausing at the doorway to his room, Vader's gaze tracked back to his wife who was sitting on the sofa she'd claimed and was now working on something on a datapad. He pitched his words for Threepio even as his gaze stayed on his wife. "I'd rather she didn't try to turn those skills on me again."

"Again?"

Vader wasn't about to explain and changed the subject. "Is there anything left for dinner?"

"Oh *plenty* sir," Threepio assured him happily. "Mistress Padmé has eaten since several times since your discussion yesterday, so I thought it prudent to make enough should she

require a snack this evening; and for *you* of course.”

“Of course. Heat a plate for me, Threepio; I’ll be back out in a minute.”

“Immediately, sir.”

With one last, lingering look at his wife, Vader went to change. Slipping on his loose trousers and robe, he belted it casually before exiting into the main area again and heading for the kitchenette. Threepio was there, fixing him a plate, and Vader took the opportunity to pour himself a cup of caf and sip it.

He let out a soft sigh; perfect. Like always. Threepio had come a long way from the sludge he’d once made Shmi on Tatooine. Frowning at the thought of his mother, Vader pushed aside the memory and took another sip of the caf. “How’d you get Padmé to eat, Threepio?”

“It was not anything I said, sir. She simply requested my help with breakfast this morning. I had *thought* it to have been what *you* said yesterday.”

“I threatened her with a nutrient drip again,” Vader observed wryly. “I doubt that’s what changed her mind.”

“Then I am sorry to say I do not know what brought on her sudden desire to eat, Lord Vader. Perhaps it was something Artoo said?” Which was possible with the scolding Vader had walked out on the previous night. “I am, however, most relieved at the development.”

“That makes two of us.” He settled at the table as Threepio served him. “What’s she been doing with her day, anyway?”

“Very little, sir. Artoo has collected some archival footage from senate meetings she has missed, but she has done very little with it.”

“Senate footage?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did she say why?”

“No, sir.” Threepio sounded suddenly puzzled. “Mistress Padmé has long held the opinion that true democracy in the Repub—”

“Empire.”

“Sir?”

“The Republic is gone, Threepio; it’s now the Galactic Empire.”

“Oh! Pardon me, sir; my apologies! Shall I rephrase that?”

“Yes.”

“Immediately, sir. Mistress Padmé has long held the opinion that true democracy in the *Galactic Empire* no longer exists.”

Vader tucked into his meal with a faint smile, glad to see that Nerf steaks and various tubers were the main attraction. Threepio’s influence no doubt; it was probably one of the more expensive cuts available to him out here.

“If I may say so sir, you seem to be in a fine mood this evening.”

“A good workout,” Vader told the droid nonchalantly, omitting the fact that the end result was the return of his good humor at the expense of his apprentice; an apprentice that was currently recuperating in a bacta tank and would be there for the next couple of days, “tends to have that effect.”

“Wonderful! Then, might I suggest, that you speak with Mistress Padmé this evening? Since my arrival I have not seen her interact with anyone except you and I dare say she is missing the human aspect of conversations?”

His fork was part way to his mouth when Vader paused to glance up at the droid and then finished his bite. Watching the protocol droid, he chewed slowly as he digested the comment that had come from left field. It was unexpected and surprisingly insightful.

He’d done a good job programming Threepio for something like that to have suddenly sprung up.

“Are you saying she’s... lonely, Threepio?”

“I would not presume to judge, Lord Vader, but all signs indicate that she is suffering from the lack of companionship.”

“She knows where to find me and, if I’m not here, how to get in touch with me if she wants company,” he informed the droid curtly, ending the conversation as he turned back to his meal. “If she’s lonely, it’s her own fault.”

“Yes, sir.” Threepio’s tone was subdued and deferential as he turned back to cleaning up and preserving what was left of their dinner.

Vader took another couple of bites, his appetite soured by the reminder of his wife’s rejections and abruptly pushed away from the table. Without a word to the droid, he exited the kitchenette and headed for the lounge. Padmé was watching a holo vid and, not in the mood to fight with her, he stepped in front of the control panel and keyed open the door to his office. She said nothing, gave no indication she was even aware of his passing other than a flick of her eyelids as she glanced at him and then back to the screen.

Stepping in, he closed and secured the door behind him before going to his desk; he finished booting up the console before he realized he didn’t have the disk containing Threepio’s memories. His good mood abruptly vanished as he recalled where he’d left it and why. Slapping the desk, he keyed in the comlink code specific to Artoo.

Dressed as he was, he wasn’t about to head back to the bridge; he’d have his little robotic buddy collect it, but even as he made that decision, he realized he couldn’t simply scan through the files as he’d been doing with half an ear. He needed to refocus his search on the timeframe that Artoo had suggested and he vowed to do just that.

He didn’t know if he could take another image of Padmé turning to another man for support, and *accepting* it when she continued to refused his.

Month Twenty Five, Day 7 PEF

Author's Note: I've been requested (prevailed upon?) to write the intimate "Training Salle" confrontation between Vader and Padme from chapter 52. Daenarrash had originally intended to do so, but as she's MIA, I took the liberty of doing so.

If you'd like to read it, please PM me and I'll send it your way

Please note that parts of the first part of this chapter are from Daenarrash's Vignettes about Padme demanding her children from Bail and being refused. The series is called "Hellbound to Redemption".

Chapter 70

Alderaan — Month Twenty Five, Day Seven PEF

Early morning

"No you don't! You have no idea what it's like! You've never woken up after being in a coma for six months, desperate to see your children — children you barely remember giving birth to, children you weren't able to see and hold and spend time with — only to find out two months later they're not even on the base. And they haven't been since right after they were born!"

Bail work with a start, grasping his chest as he inhaled sharply, Padmé's accusation ringing in his ears, sounding so loudly she might have been screaming at him from the side of his bed. Glancing at Brea to ensure his nightmare hadn't woken her this time, he slid out of bed and into his robe, heading for the balcony connected to their room.

Padmé's voice echoed in his head as Bail slipped through the door and leaned against the rail on the balcony of his suite, staring without seeing the Mountain vista before him. Instead he saw Padmé's expression, her resolve; her expectation. An expectation he'd had to crush.

"Bail, please. I deserve to know,"

He could hear her responding to his placating words, remember that even as he said them they wouldn't be enough; that she'd never accept them. Padmé's anguish at the separation from her children had been chilling and heart wrenching to bear, but necessary. She'd never accepted it and it had driven a wedge between her and the rest of the Alliance membership. A membership she'd helped solidify and nurture in its initial conception.

That, among other things, had made it all the harder.

"Why can't you understand? These are my children. Mine! I have every right to know what you've done with them; to know where they are."

He shook his head to clear it, trying to move past the bitter bile of the willing betrayal he was committing against one of his oldest and dearest friends. A betrayal that the Jedi had deemed necessary to protect the two innocent lives rather than allow a potentially volatile circumstance to explode.

He hadn't had this particular dream in months and now, after Max's visit, it had resumed.

It couldn't be a coincidence.

Master Yoda, the diminutive Jedi Master, had been the one to suggest Luke and Leia be separated from Padmé, coma or not. He'd believed their combined presence would be like a beacon in the Force for both their father and his new Master and they would not be safe no matter where they went so long as they were together.

If Vader were to ever find out she was alive he'd track her down and claim her, by force no doubt, and claim her children in the name of the Empire and Sith. Padmé'd be powerless to stop him; she wouldn't be able to stop him from taking Luke and Leia away from her; she wouldn't be able to stop him from corrupting them.

She hadn't want to believe that and nothing Bail had said could dissuade her.

Padmé had wanted to believe she could protect her children against anything — including *him* if need be.

It was that blind failing that had solidified Bail's determination every time she'd come to beg for her children's location; he couldn't risk the lives of two innocent babies simply because their mother *thought* she could protect them.

Which, with Padmé missing, Bail believed his worst nightmare had come to pass; Padmé had been captured by Vader.

Everything hinged on exactly how Vader treated her; how long it took him to break her. Padmé, unlike a droid, couldn't undergo a memory wipe and she knew much, *too much*, about the fledgling Alliance. She knew its members, its leaders; she knew where their head quarters were located and how to find them. If she shared that information with Vader, retribution would be swift and brutal. The Alliance would be finished before it truly began.

"Bail?"

Turning from the rail at his wife's sleepy call, Bail Organa cringed as he realized his absence in the bed, or perhaps the gentle breeze coming in through the partially open door, had woken her. "Here, Breha."

There was a rustling of cloth before she appeared, her hair tussled from sleep, her eyes showing the delighted exhaustion and pride only a small child can bring. She joined him, ducking under his arm to look out across the mountain vista that was their everyday view. Her arms slid about his waist as she pressed her head to his shoulder and brushed a kiss across his cheek. Not a very demonstrative person, she was always amorous in the mornings and Bail tended to take advantage — with her blessing.

But this morning he had other things on his mind.

Bail tightened his grip on her, tilting his head to rest his cheek against her temple. He was silent, holding her, as he watched the first rays of false dawn cresting the mountain peaks, one

hand rhythmically stroking her back. She waited in silence for him to say something and, after a few minutes, decided he needed prompting.

"You've been melancholy since Max was here."

Bail exhaled softly, knowing she'd pick up on it. After the way he'd had nightmares when Padmé had awoken from her coma insisting to see her children, he'd been unable to keep the truth of the situation from his wife. In fact, hadn't wanted to; Breha was his strength. Having her know the truth had given him an excellent sounding board and someone in his corner. She hadn't initially approved of what he'd done in taking the twins from Padmé, but she'd accepted it as a necessity to keep Leia out of Vader and the Emperor's clutches.

She was also, he knew, good at playing devil's advocate and he needed that tonight. "I keep wondering if we're doing the right thing," he admitted. "Leia is our daughter; she'll never know anything else, but keeping her from Padmé... I know why, my darling; I simply don't feel right doing it."

"What would happen if we gave Leia to Padmé, Bail?" Breha's question was soft. "You told me that the Jedi who advised you stated any offspring who survived Padmé's coma would be a threat should they reach maturity. If Leia were to go back to Padmé now, what are the chances our cherub would reach that age?"

"Slim," he whispered the admission. "The Emperor would likely have her killed."

"Exactly. Padmé can't see that; she's too close to the situation."

"Some would argue, my love, that so are we."

Breha tilted her head back to regard him shrewdly. "We're Leia's parents in every sense of the word, Bail; she's never known anyone or anything else. Of course we're too close to this. But you can't say that you didn't tell Padmé the reasons why her children were hidden."

"But does that make it right, Breha?"

"This is a difficult situation, my heart," she lifted one hand to gently stroke his cheek. "Made all the more difficult for the ties we have with Padmé. My heart bleeds for her for being separated from her children, but I can't let my heart tell me what to do here. Leia has a good home with us; a *safe* home. I respect that Padmé believes she could give her that, but we both know she can't. If Vader found her, he wouldn't be able to keep the information from the Emperor and then..." Breha shook her head, tears gathering in her eyes. "I tell myself I'd be a good person and hand Leia back to Padmé if things were different; if Vader and the Emperor were gone... but she's our daughter too, for all Padmé bore her."

Bail tightened his grip on her. "And now you see the source of my anxiety," he whispered against her temple, turning to hug her properly. "I keep telling myself I can't jepordize Leia's safety; that we can't take the chance. Not just a chance, but *hope* for the Galaxy... but that doesn't make it any easier."

Breha's hands slid up his bare back, under the loose robe he'd thrown on to stand on the balcony. "Come back to bed, Bail," she whispered suggestively, drawing him with her as she took a step back. "We can help each other forget."

He smiled faintly, ducking his head to kiss her gently and allowed his wife to lead him back inside.

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Five, Day Seven PEF

Just before midnight — Late night

The tendrils of the nightmare that had caught her in their grasp were difficult to shake as Padmé woke with a muted cry. Casting about her, unaware that her eyes were wild, she pressed one hand against her mouth and one against her heart to try and calm its racing beat.

A muffled gasp crossed her lips as she bit into her cheek in an attempt to deal with the overpowering emotions; emotions that were all the closer to the surface since her argument with Vader on Empire Day. She'd never fully regained her defenses, the constant lack of sleep and nourishment, no matter how she was trying to now combat them, taking their toll.

She was tired, weary of fighting, and tonight her defenses were low. So low she was having trouble regaining the composure, the drive, that had been so essential to maintaining her resistance thus far. tonight she was vulnerable and felt it.

The *need* to be held hit her hard and had her on her feet, moving towards Vader's bedchamber before it became a conscious thought. It was a reaction, plain and simple; an instinct. She was already half way across the room before she understood where she was going and exactly why... and her pace slowed.

Unlike other nights, the door was closed, as if to keep her out, and she paused just outside of it. Not reaching for the door controls, she closed her eyes and pressed her forehead against the portal as she lay one hand flat against it, wishing it was him but not; she couldn't take his brand of comfort. Not in her current state of mind.

She needed to be held, comforted as he'd started to do on Empire Day before arguing with her; she needed that physical link to another person, some kind of proof that she wasn't alone.

But she couldn't take that step.

She couldn't wake him; couldn't ask for his help.

Crossing that threshold, going to him, would be opening a metaphorical door she wasn't sure she could close. It would be like admitting... admitting that he was the man she'd married and that she needed a connection.

She couldn't do it.

Inhaling a shaky breath and appalled at what she'd just about done without giving it any real thought, she turned away from the door to make her way back to the view port. She'd been through rough nights before, she would survive this one. By morning she'd be able to deal with Vader and his machinations but she couldn't, wouldn't, be able to help herself tonight if she turned to him out of need.

Better to deny herself, to work on silently shoring up her defenses for the battles to come rather than submit or succumb to the weakness. It was a good argument that would, she

silently suspected as she passed the sofa, ultimately prove to be futile.

Inside his bedchamber, Vader stared at the ceiling, one arm stretched out towards the door, his fingers open in an almost beseeching gesture as Padmé moved around in the lounge. He'd sensed her distress and confusion from the living room; had woken to the strength of it.

A silent war was waging in his mind, one that pitted his sense of responsibility and depth affection for her against his good judgment.

Did he dare go to her?

After his last attempts, he was leery of trying again; he was tired of being rejected when all he wanted to do was help. She might have turned to him briefly before withdrawing again, but those were an incongruity in behavior. He'd hurt her before and been careful about verbally sparring with her since, but that didn't mean he wanted to submit himself for more pain.

For it was pain, his own brand of self-inflicted torture, every time he tried to reach out for her and she pushed him away.

He pushed himself up on one elbow as the emotional contradiction he knew was his wife paused outside his door... and then moved away. Frowning at the door when she failed to enter, he could practically *hear* her soft footsteps as they padded away again, feeling her desperation, her *need*, even as he felt her confusion. The fact she'd come so close told him just how badly she was hurting and, as much as he might want to ignore it, he found he couldn't.

With a sigh, he shook his head and crawled out of bed, silently cursing himself a fool as he slipped into his pants. Forgoing his robe, he padded on bare feet to the door and palmed it open. *I'll just check on her*, he told himself silently. *Make sure she's recovering.*

The lights were still off in the suite, the glow from the planet below as it reflected the light from the system's sun the only illumination, but Vader had no trouble picking up the form of his wife at the viewport. Her hands were on the edge as he drew near, gripping it tight enough he suspected she'd be bruised come morning.

The physical pain, he suspected, was a welcome distraction from the jumble of her emotions as she struggled with her composure. She was rigid as he drew near, stopping a couple of feet away, angled to see her face. She swayed where she stood; looking unblinkingly down at the planet and Vader wondered what she saw or if she saw it at all.

His presence brought a spike in her emotions, one he had trouble identifying as the charged silence stretched between them. Padmé knew he was there but, as he'd expected she would, was ignoring him. He considered her Force signature, feeling the pulse of her despair like his own heartbeat, and noted with some concern that she wasn't just swaying, but *shaking*.

"Another nightmare?"

It was a question that was more of a statement; he'd never seen anything else that could drive her to this state. His voice triggered a reaction; she inhaled a shaky breath and closed

her eyes — but didn't answer him. Visibly struggling for composure, he drew her like nothing else and Vader took a step towards her.

"Padmé," his tone was imploring, urging her to answer him. Had it just been a nightmare or was there something more to this?

She drew in another wavering breath, her fingers realigning on the edge of the viewport as her eyes opened. Her exhale came out just as shakily, almost a whimper.

And, all at once, he identified the new emotion underlying her pain; shame.

She was ashamed of the fact she'd nearly come to him; ashamed of the fact she'd needed someone and turned his way — however briefly — again. Ashamed of what her instincts were urging her to do; to need.

With a shake of his head, he turned on his heel; if she didn't want his help, wouldn't ask for it, he wasn't about to offer again. A man could only take so much rejection and, after over a month of it, he'd had his fill. Let her deal with it on her own if she was so strong; he was through getting kicked in the teeth.

He'd barely taken two steps before a surge of panic spiked within her emotional mess, and he heard her move, only to be brought up short by her desperate call.

"Anakin — wait!"

Anakin.

He turned, surprised she'd called him by name; surprised she'd called him at all, and his gaze met hers. Horror lingered in her orbs and he realized her call hadn't be a conscious decision, but one born of desperation. Unlike the unconscious appellation of his nickname on Empire Day, Padmé was more than aware of what she'd just done.

"I'm surprised," he smiled almost smugly, enjoying the fact she hadn't intended to call him back, and disdain entered his tone, "you remember my name."

She flinched, tears welling up in her eyes as she gripped the viewport ledge for support. "Don't," she told him evenly, her words steady until she continued as she refused to look away. "Just don't."

The smugness drained away as he realized just how precarious her hold on her emotions, her hold on herself, was. He took the half dozen strides necessary to bring him to her, his expression softening as he reached up to cup her face in one hand. She tilted it into his touch, settling into the palm of his hand with a broken break. His thumb traced over her cheek, feeling the sharp jut of the bone as he searched her gaze with eyes so blue with concern he was unaware of the way they affected her.

"What do you want then?"

His expression, his tone, his *actions* were all pure Anakin and the hard won composure she'd salvaged fled. She crumbled; there was no other way to describe it. "You know what I want," she replied brokenly, tears slipping from the corner of her eyes as she began to cry. "I want my children. I want them back. I just... just *want* them back!"

Slipping an arm about her waist, he pulled her close even as he stepped towards her. Enclosing her in his shielding embrace, he offered her what she needed. Her arms came up as she buried her face in the curve of his neck, clinging to him with desperate strength.

Rubbing one hand down her back, he attempted to offer the comfort she so desired. Her arms tightened and he was forced to wrap and leave one arm about her waist to hold her where she needed to be, lest she sag to the floor. His other hand burrowed under the fall of her hair, gently rubbing the base of her skull, cradling her head as she curled into his touch. There was no restraint in her actions; no hesitation.

“Please, Anakin... I...”

Her plea was a broken whisper against his skin that made his heart lurch. A part of him wasn't certain how to react to the fact she was calling him Anakin again; the other part was just glad she was calling him anything. He brushed his lips over her temple, her cheek, her hair as she cried, holding her tightly. The hostility she'd been feeling towards him mellowed, ebbing, lost in the waves of undulating sorrow as she clung to him as if for dear life.

Vader tucked his face next to hers, offering a silent comfort in lieu of saying anything lest he say the *wrong* thing again. He simply did what felt natural and *right* now that she was willingly in his embrace once more. How long they stood there, he didn't know. It was some time before her tears ebbed, but they didn't stop completely. They continued to flow, her grip no less desperate as the tide ran itself out.

His neck and chest were moist where her tears had bathed his skin, but he didn't care; she didn't seem to be in any hurry to escape his embrace and he gripped her tightly, the awkward, comfortable silence between them one of unexpected accord. Unwilling to relinquish her, he buried his face in her hair, inhaling her scent, drawing comfort from her acceptance of his presence the way she was drawing it from his.

This was what he'd needed from her as much as she needed it from him.

They stood locked together in mutual support for long minutes, neither willing to surrender it, neither willing to move.

Finally shifting his grip on her, he let her down slowly, considering the wisdom of sweeping her into his arms and carrying her to bed before thinking better of it. Just because she'd accepted his touch now, didn't mean she'd accept anything more. Sliding his hand free of her hair, he considered the wisdom of suggesting it to her. Easing back even further so he could look down into her face, he mentally considered how to broach the subject.

A hint of fear lit her eyes. “No!” she clutched him tightly, preventing his further withdrawal. “Don't go.”

He blinked caught off guard by the plea. After her treatment him and his overtures to help her this last month, they were words he'd never expected to hear from her again. Her throat worked as he watched and the next words out of her mouth were just as surprising.

“Stay with me.”

Searching her expression, he lifted his hand to her face again. Brushing the backs of his fingers over her cheek before running his thumb along her jaw line, he struggled to keep the delight he felt at that request from showing. He sensed this was an important moment; a

moment where, if he made the wrong move, she'd turn from him again. Perhaps this time for good.

Unmoving in her grasp, he carefully modulated his tone, subdued and cautious — exactly how he felt minus the spike of elation. “Are you sure?”

Swallowing hard, she returned the look, searching his features for a moment where he swore his heart stopped as he held his breath. She then nodded once, sharply.

Exhaling softly, promising himself he wouldn't squander this chance but capitalize on it, he tilted his forehead to hers. “What do you want me to do?”

“I...” she hesitated, seeming at a loss for words, and he could feel her uncertainty return.

He could see it in her face, read it in her eyes; she'd made the request but didn't know why or what exactly she needed. He slid his palm along her jaw, cupping her face, his voice a soft caress and holding the barest hint of suggestion. “You could come back to bed with me.”

She jerked in his hold, her look suddenly cross as she attempted to step back. “No!”

“All right, all right!” Exasperated, he maintained his grip, not letting her escape and she stopped fighting him with his acquiescence, allowing him to hold her once more. “What would you have me do, then?”

She stayed silent for a long minute and he could sense her gathering her courage, sorting through what options they had and finally settled on one; a benign one. A *safe* one. “Just... just stay out here with me?”

“All right.” He brushed away her tears as he took in the exhaustion in her expression and the way she leaned against him; he was practically supporting her whole weight — and that wasn't much. “You should try and get some sleep.”

She shook her head, fear dancing in her brown eyes.

“Don't worry,” he offered gently, tightening his grip on her. “I'll be right here.”

“I don't—”

“I promise, Padmé; I won't leave your side. You need to try and sleep.”

“I know, I just...” she glanced apprehensively at the sofa before looking back at him. Sleep had not been something she'd looked forward to in a long time and Vader knew it.

“I'll be right here,” he repeated, willing her to see the honesty in his eyes, the desire to see her well rested if even for a single night even at a personal cost to his. “I'm not going anywhere.”

It took a moment before she seemed to accept his word and nodded hesitantly, allowing him to lead her back to the sofa and the bed she'd made.

Reluctantly releasing her from his arms, he kept firm hold of one hand, helping her into the covers before sitting beside her. Her hand still in his, he ran his thumb over the back of it, watching her as she shifted within the cocoon, trying to get comfortable. Using his other hand, he adjusted a blanket over top her, running his hand down the soft material to smooth it

over her form. His palm glided from her shoulder, down across her chest and over her stomach before sliding out to her hip and falling away.

Padmé stilled, watching him watching her. She searched his face for long minutes, her eyes suddenly holding an expression he couldn't read; even her emotions were quieter, exhaustion coloring everything.

Unable to tell what she was thinking, he kept his tone low and soothing. "What is it?"

"I see you now."

His brows drew together, not understanding.

"Remember when you told me you're always here? That it was just a matter of whether I want to see you or not?"

Ah; so that's what she meant. He nodded, well remembering that conversation and the agony he'd willingly put himself through to heal her before it. To see her now, without the blemish Asajj had inflicted, proved it had been well worth it. As had the bout of lovemaking in the training salle before that, but he doubted that's what she was thinking of.

"I see you now." Her words were soft as she reiterated her statement. "You're finally here in front of me. But how much longer before you go away again?"

He bent his head, taking her hand in both of his and lifted it to his lips. Pressing a gentle, heartfelt kiss to her knuckles, he kept his gaze on hers. "I'll always be here, Padmé." he offered softly. "I promise."

She tugged her hand from his grip, rolling onto her side to face him, her voice low and pained but holding a note of resignation that indicated she had no wish to fight with him. No wish to drive him away. "Don't make promises you can't keep."

Her eyes closed as he felt the hit, the stinging bite of those words bringing an instant retort to his lips. A retort he was quick to smother. Much as he wanted to address them, he knew now wasn't the time. He could have forced the issue, started a fight with her, *made* her hear his point of view, but he had no interest in making things worse between them.

Later he could address the fact that she didn't understand; that she really needed to accept. The fact that he was who he was and always had been. Who she'd *always* known him to be.

For now he would simply enjoy the fact that she'd finally turned to him, asking for the comfort she needed to be able to endure her nightmares. Not only asking him, but calling him by name while asking him to stay. It was a monumental step forward he'd started to think would never happen; one that had seemed to be implausible the better he got to know the changes within her.

Watching her, letting go of the instant anger her comment had spawned, he exhaled softly and noted she was quick to journey back into slumber despite her fear of it. A reflection of how secure she felt in his presence? He hoped so. He waited, not touching her, for what felt like an eternity as he listened to her breathing change, finally slowing into the deep rhythms of REM sleep.

This was the danger zone; where her nightmares waited.

Knowing this, he reached out, running the backs of his fingers over her face. It was a gesture he'd used often during the clone wars, a gesture that had been safe when they'd been observed from one side but not the other; a gesture of longing and affirmation. She responded to it, turning her face into his touch with a half smile and an indistinct murmur that *could* have been his name.

Not willing to risk waking her, he gently smoothed her hair, pushing it out of her face so it wouldn't cause her problems before reluctantly removing his hand. He slid it instead into hers, relishing the way her fingers locked automatically with his.

In slumber she was honest, her body's reactions betraying her desire for his touch, and he bent his head to press his lips against her knuckles once more, holding that hand in both of his. Closing his eyes, he bowed his head, and called on the Force to ease her deeper into slumber, beyond her nightmares.

Padmé needed to sleep and he intended to ensure she got it.

Month Twenty Five, Day 8 PEF

Chapter 71

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Five, Day Eight PEF

Morning

The deep, restful sleep that had claimed Padmé with Vader's assistance was slow to withdraw and, as morning called her from slumber, she fought its call. After weeks, months... *years* of dreading sleep, it was a novel concept to not want to wake. But wake she did, her eyes fluttering open reluctantly as a sound penetrated her dreamless sleep.

Focusing on her surroundings, Padmé blinked as her gaze fell on the man stretched out rather awkwardly at the end of the sofa who was making the noise. His legs were stretched out, one on the coffee table, one towards the far side of the sofa, his pants riding low on his hips and his bare feet peeking out at the bottoms. She took in the even rise and fall of his naked chest, noting with detached amusement that it matched the rise and fall of his snores. Following his skin upwards to the uncomfortable tilt of his neck, she noted that his head lay on an outstretched arm along the back of the sofa, one of her hands still caught firmly in his.

He'd kept his promise.

A rueful smile crossed her lips as she watched him sleep and she shook her head once.

Last night had been bad; very bad. She'd needed and he'd been there, offering the comfort and support she'd have been unable to cope without... but had it had to come from Vader, the man with Anakin's face? The last time she'd turned to him, he'd turned it into an argument; would he do the same again this morning? Use her weakness against her; take advantage of it and try to use it as a weapon? As a way for her to see *his* skewed point of view?

She sighed softly, taking in the smooth lines of his features; the scar across his eye and cheek; the fall of his hair across his brow — the familiar features of Anakin, just as the feel of the hand in hers was familiar.

The thought came from somewhere in her subconscious that, despite what might happen next, this had been nice. It had been nice to have someone to lean on, to have *Anakin* to lean on, for that was how he'd seemed the night before. So much so that she'd called him by name. Been able to see Anakin in each of his looks, his gestures; he'd *been* Anakin for all intents and purposes.

Or had it just been her own wishful thinking, her need making her see what she wanted to see?

Watching him now, she didn't know.

Would she be able to call him Anakin again; would he give her cause to? Or would he shift back into the patterns she'd seen since arriving? Would he be arrogant and demanding; would he take instead of give; instruct instead of ask?

Her hand twitched in his and his fingers closed once more about them, an automatic reflex that was reminiscent of her husband; just one more small thing to prey on her mind. Carefully extracting her hand, she eased from her blankets and stood, heading for the 'fresher.

She was about to step through the doorway when Vader's comlink began to sound. She paused, glancing at the open door to his bedchamber where the sound of comlink was coming from and then back towards where he was still sprawled in his uncomfortable position on the sofa.

Deciding she should ignore it, if it was important someone would fetch him, Padmé disappeared into the 'fresher and secured the door behind her.

The repeated sound of the door chime woke him, his head coming up from its position with a grimace as his neck cracked, and Vader blinked blearily. A pain in his leg made him wince as he straightened, his leg falling from the table as he realized he wasn't in his bed and couldn't immediately place where he was.

Rubbing his hand over the back of his neck, he rotated it as he tried to work the kink out, and paused as his gaze fell on the tangled blankets on the other end of the sofa.

Padmé.

Her nightmare.

Her request.

His agreement.

Straightening he looked about. "Padmé?" concerned after the way he'd seen her the previous night, Vader stood. Stepping away from the sofa, he frowned when he couldn't see her or sense the echoes of the intense turmoil she'd been experiencing the night before. "Padmé?"

The door chime sounded again and Vader looked towards it, annoyed by the interruption even as he realized it was what had woken him in the first place. He paused, deciding to keep looking for Padmé until the door chime sounded yet again, this time a couple of times and silently swore, turning towards the main entrance to the suite.

Whoever was so persistent was going to have to talk quickly or he'd see to it they didn't talk ever again. Stalking to the portal, he palmed it open, knowing his expression was as dark as his mood. The man on the other side of the door was one of his Lieutenants; a man who'd been with him for some time. As the door opened, the Lieutenant took a step back before straightening his spine with a crisp salute.

Not bothering to hide his irritation, Vader's tone was clipped, his words harsh. "What is it, Lieutenant?"

Visibly swallowing hard, the Lieutenant took in Vader's state of undress and paled. "Pardon the interruption, Lord Vader, but we have been trying to contact you for the past twenty minutes. When you didn't answer, we feared something might be wrong."

He hadn't heard the comlink; a comlink which was still on the bedside table beside the bed he hadn't slept in for most of the night. Not about to inform the Lieutenant of that. He deliberately adjusted his expression to appear perturbed. "I've been preoccupied."

The Lieutenant's gaze darted behind him before it deliberately dropped to Vader's state of undress, his lips tightening as he struggled to hide a smirk. "Yes, my Lord. Of course."

Vader's gaze narrowed, his hand flexing at his side. He wanted nothing more than to strangle the man — except he still didn't know why he was there. Once he did, he was going to *enjoy* watching him wriggle as he gasped for breath, clutching his throat, his eyes bugging out—

Seeming to catch the threat gleaming in Vader's eyes, the Lieutenant forged ahead quickly, extending a datapad. "I'm here to inform you that Cleek has made contact; she said it was quite urgent."

The surge of elation that swept through Vader with those words was enough to dispel the urge to kill the man and he snatched the datapad with eager fingers. This Lieutenant was but one of a couple to whom Cleek had been instructed to contact in the unlikely event he'd been unreachable. This meant news, *good* news; news about the twins.

Holding himself in check as he knew better than to show the kind of emotion that was coursing through him to anyone in his crew, he scanned the rough information with eager eyes. It took but a moment for him to confirm it was from Cleek and that they had a promising lead he would need to follow up immediately. Vader glanced back at the lieutenant. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

It was a clear dismissal and the Lieutenant bowed before striding away.

His gaze going back to the datapad, Vader turned to walk back into the suite, scanning the information as he took slow steps, not focused on his surroundings, his attention completely caught by the report. So much so that, when the door to the 'fresher opened a moment later and Padmé emerged, he didn't notice until she walked by him, her presence finally drawing his attention.

Looking up as she headed for the lounge, he lifted an eyebrow in appreciation as he took note of the fact she was dressed in little more than a half robe. Her long, bare legs peaked out from the bottom, her hands clutching the neck together. Appreciative of the sight as he was, he didn't comment on it; his thoughts were still centered on the datapad in his hand. "I have good news."

"What — you're finally letting me go?"

He narrowed his eyes at her sarcasm. "No," holding up the datapad, he drew her gaze to it. "It's possible I have a lead on Luke and Leia."

With a surge of excitement that mirrored his own, Padmé's eyes widened and her gaze darted from the datapad to his, and then back, hope blossoming in a heartbeat. Then her eyes met his again and, in another heartbeat, he saw that hope replaced by unmitigated anger.

“No. *No!*” advancing on him, her words snapped with ire. “I *told* you I didn’t want you looking for them!”

“They’re my children too, Padmé, and I want to find them.”

“I don’t want you to.” Stretching out her hand, she tried to snatch the datapad from his grasp. “Stop looking for them. You have no right—”

He lifted the datapad out of her reach and cut her off. “We’ve been through this; I have as much right to look for them as you do. *I’m their father.*”

Staring at each other, his intense statement hung heavily between them, Padmé was visibly shaken. She swallowed hard, clenching and unclenching her fists and Vader thought for a moment she would come after him again. To his surprise, she didn’t. She seemed to *finally* have taken the hint that this was one area where he was more than a little exasperated; he had no wish to argue with her about the twins and he wasn’t rehashing this. It was too dangerous; too easy to hurt her.

He didn’t dare.

But he also wouldn’t back down on this; she needed to understand that. Her gaze dropped back to the datapad and he could almost see the thought process in her head. She wanted to find their children as much as he did, but didn’t want his help to do so; he knew it, but that wasn’t going to stop him. And Padmé, much to his surprise, seemed to suddenly realize it too.

“As their father,” her words were pained, no longer able to deny the basic facts to him or to herself as her shoulders slumped. “You’ll probably raise them to be Sith Lords.”

“And after last night,” he smiled, condensation in his tone, crossing his arms over his chest as he refused to address her statement, “this is the thanks I get for looking for our children.”

She flinched despite the anger he could see in her expression, attempting to glare at him and raising his spirits when she couldn’t quite do it. Instead her voice was tight, raw, before she turned on her heel to head for the lounge again. “And I told *you* not to make promises you can’t keep.”

Vader’s arms slackened across his chest, his first thought to go after her and was already taking a step to do so when he frowned and considered the situation for a minute. He knew how *he* wanted to respond but he’d made a conscious decision to be ‘more like Anakin’ and it gave him pause.

It was all the time Padmé needed to collect her clothing and disappear back into the ‘fresher, taking the decision effectively out of his hands.

Not, he reflected, how he’d hoped the day would begin.

Tapping the datapad on the back of his artificial fingers, he shook his head and headed for his office to take a closer look at the information on it. As he headed in that direction, Padmé’s anxiety steadily climbed and his irritation grew as he settled before his work station.

If she’d only work *with* him to help him find their children, he suspected they’d be able to blast past any barriers or obstacles and find them swiftly. As it was, without her cooperation, things were slow going and, having no jumping off point other than the fact that the twins were at *least* eighteen months old, he’d blundered some.

After unwitting supplying their lifeday, Padmé hadn't surrendered anything further about the twins and Vader had refined his search but not yet sent the information to Cleek; he wanted to have something for her to track first. That the mercenary had supplied him with a possible lead without it was nothing short of astonishing.

Calling up the information in the database, he noted that the babies in the family on the report were not listed by name and grimaced. Another complication to add to his search; it was possible whomever had registered Luke and Leia had simply put "baby boy" and "baby girl" instead of their names.

Shaking the thought away, he concentrated on the information Cleek had supplied — and realized he couldn't work from his office; he was going to need access to his more powerfully encoded transmitter on the bridge.

Still... he smiled. The information was viable on first glance and when compared with the information he knew about the twins. Hopeful, he headed back into his suite to find Padmé's worry over his announcement was steadily climbing. He frowned, turning the corner to head for the 'fresher to start his day, when Padmé stepped around it.

"I contacted Commander Grange."

He frowned, opening his mouth to reply when his comlink sounded. Deliberately keeping his eyes locked on hers, he answered it where she could hear and a smirk crossed his lips as the familiar voice of the Commander in charge of Padmé's security detail rang through.

"The Lady Vader's requested our escort, my Lord."

"Yes, I'm aware of that, Commander. You may proceed."

"Yes sir."

He shut off the comlink, knowing Grange would be by shortly, but didn't break the eye contact with her. It was the first time she'd been out of the suite in some time and he nodded once, but was unable to bring himself to smile as he stepped around her. "Enjoy your walk."

"I—"

But he was already inside, the door closing to cut her off, and Padmé was left in the suite to her own devices. Setting the data aside, Vader shucked his clothes and started the shower. She might not consciously want him searching for their children, but her pleas when he'd held her in his arms last night held more force than any denial she'd spouted at him.

For all she didn't want him searching, for all she didn't want *him* near Luke and Leia, she'd practically begged him to make this situation right. And that, he resolved as he stepped under the spray, was exactly what he was going to do.

Evening

Incompetence.

Vader couldn't stand it; didn't condone it and wouldn't accept it from any under of his command. Especially in this area and heads had rolled when the lead he'd been given just that

morning hadn't panned out.

His whole form crackled with Darkside energy as he swept another of the droids in his training salle off its feet, darkly reflecting on how his hopes had been crushed so thoroughly.

Cleek's information had been good; *too* good.

The children she'd discovered had come from a family that had gone into hiding, adopted from parents who had mysteriously disappeared and weren't named. With Asajj still in bacta and Toydaria almost firmly within his control, Vader had decided to chance leaving the *Exactor* for the coordinates provided in Cleek's report. It hadn't taken long, being barely an hour away on one of Lannik's moons.

Disappointment had been just around the corner.

Upon landing on a neutral backwater moon, he'd dispatched the squads accompanying him to secure the area around the address provided. Cleek's informant and primary contact on the planet — the one who'd discovered the cleverly hidden twins — had met him on the ground and escorted him to the place.

Only to find twin *boys* the same age as his own children would have been.

The *snap* of the informant's neck hadn't satisfied his anger and disappointment upon his return to the ship, not even after holding the man in a Force choke above the deck for an ever too brief time. The Commander to the squad who'd attempted to offer him platitudes had been crushed much the same way, Vader venting his anger on the man by not only choking him, but taking his head off with his lightsaber when he'd attempted to continue speaking through the Force induced punishment.

The informant's network of spies, some of whom had come to witness Vader's arrival had been next, Vader sweeping through their ranks with devastating precision as he removed the most cocky and self assured. Including one who'd dared suggest their failure was *his* fault.

Vader's fault for not providing them with enough information to eliminate these twins as suspects.

That carnage hadn't helped any more than the others — except to instill in the survivors the necessity of perfection. Vader, they knew as they scrambled for safety, would tolerate no more mistakes. It was a lesson that would spread back to the rest of Cleek's network for Vader, if he contacted her, would most certainly reach through that connection and happily snap her neck for getting his hopes up.

He'd toyed with the idea of pulling Asajj out of bacta offer him a *real* challenge, but dismissed it upon his arrival back on the *Exactor*; in his current frame of mind he acknowledged that he'd gladly kill her and she was more useful to him alive.

For the moment.

So here he was, inside his training salle, fighting hand to hand with the assassin droids he'd reprogrammed specifically for this purpose.

He blocked, using the Force to shore up his muscles and bones, the fury behind his disappointment making him counter attack as he pressed the attack and sent the droid hurtling

across the room with a well placed shove. Ducking under the sweep of another's punch, he caught that arm, tucked into the robotic body, and sent it sailing in the other direction.

A metal fist caught him in the kidney and he whipped around, the droid he'd sent to the mat back on its feet. Blocking the follow up, he traded blows with the droid, accepting a hit to the chest before slamming his hand, palm open, into its middle. The Force, powered by the simmering emotional stew within him, crushed motors and processors, sending the droid hurtling into the nearby wall to crash violently back to the floor where it lay still.

Turning, he looked for his next opponent and realized his pre-programmed training session was done. Lifting one arm, he wiped the sweat from his brow, not quite ready to go back to his quarters and face Padmé.

She'd known what he'd been doing today; he *knew* she'd be happy with his failure, delighted even, that he'd been unable to track their twins and bring them home. The knowledge itself was like a serrated blade, cutting and tearing the way nothing else could. Not even his injuries at Dooku's hands had ever hurt him so much. The knowledge that his *wife*, the love of his life, *wanted* him to fail, festered within him.

With the frame of mind he was in, he couldn't risk yet going back to his suite; to Padmé. She was so caught up in her own grief and anguish over the twin's absence she failed to see that he was just as determined, just as desperate, to get them home safely. More than anything he wanted Luke and Leia there with him and Padmé; he wanted them to be the family they were always meant to be; the family he and Padmé had once spoken of.

The family she no longer seemed to want because of *him*.

And that hurt. Like a raw burn being immersed in salt water every time she told him *not* to search for the twins.

He waved towards the panel which held the programming for his work out routines and started the hand to hand combat scenario again from the start, the servos on the droids kicking in — except for the one he'd just broken.

Unused to feeling the way he did, he launched himself back into the routine, accepting the first of the hits without attempting to block it, and absorbed the blow to use in his return swing. The droids, as he activated two more, would give him a chance to focus on something else; something he *could* deal with.

For hours, Vader struggled to free himself of the sting of failure and the knowledge that his wife would be delighted because of it. Exhaustion caught him unawares when the program finished next, sweat staining the collar of his shirt, the back of it sticking to his skin and he was breathing hard from having physically exerted himself in tandem with the Force, but more so.

And the turmoil hadn't completely faded.

Reluctantly, he wiped the sweat from his brow and, with a look about the training salle as the cleaning droids were activated, left to head back to his suite.

Despite his vigorous workout, he wasn't looking forward to the conversation he knew was around the corner. He'd tried to be strong for Padmé, shielding her from his own pain with the twin's absence, only it was raw and closer to the surface than he liked because of his failure

today. Padmé, he knew, would press his buttons, trying his patience with her having reiterated not wanting him to search for their children.

She might think him a monster, but he was Luke and Leia's father and wasn't about to abandon them to whatever fate the Alliance thought was best. Especially *not* when what was best for them was being with him and Padmé.

Reaching the suite, he noted that Commander Grange was once again outside. A towel was silently passed his way by the other trooper, something he'd not bothered to collect on his way back. Accepting it, he keyed in the lock code and wiped his face before slinging it around his neck.

Striding in, he paused as the door closed behind him, well able to sense Padmé's anxiety the closer he was to her. Gripping both ends of the towel in his hands, he debated going straight to the 'fresher, but he could hear Padmé and Threepio in the kitchenette and knew what he had to say couldn't wait.

More so because whatever *she* had to say in return would be something he'd have time to absorb when he headed for the 'fresher and soaked his head under the shower. Whatever barbs she threw his way, he braced himself for their sting as he turned towards the sounds with a sense of resignation.

Stopping in the doorway, he took a moment to note that Padmé was shredding a leafy vegetable as Threepio stirred something on the warmer. Vader braced his feet, readjusting his grip on the towel, his eyes on his wife. She looked more strained than usual, on edge — but at least she wasn't wielding a knife this time.

The droid turned. "Mistress Padmé, a salad, by definition has more than one ingredient. Perhaps some — oh! Hello, Lord Vader."

"Hello, Threepio."

Something in his voice caught Padmé attention and her head came up as she partially turned to look at him. There was an edge, a rawness to his words that she didn't normally associate with him. Her trepidation spiked, turning into real fear for what he had no doubt come to tell her, but underneath it all, curiosity stirred. She *wanted* to know.

Vader's gaze clashed with hers, his words even and biting. "I'm certain you'll be quite happy to know the lead was false."

Her stomach bottomed out, a tight knot forming as it clenched in sudden denial, surprising her, and she answered without thinking. "It was?"

"Yes." His snarl was accompanied by the tearing of fabric as he tugged on the towel and the fabric began to part. "I found twins but they *were not* Luke and Leia."

Padmé blinked, staring after him as he stormed away, no doubt going to the 'fresher to clean up, but her mind was more on what he'd said and the *way* he'd said it, reeling from it as if caught in a wind storm. He hadn't found Luke and Leia; hadn't traced them and brought them back to be trained in his image.

Relief, which should have been swift and instantaneous with that realization, wasn't.

Instead, Padmé found it was colored by shades of regret and disappointment, the knot in her stomach a testament to the fact that, no matter how much she'd protested otherwise, she'd been *hoping* he'd succeed where she'd previously failed. Hoping his network of spies had been more effective; hoping he'd brought her children home to her.

Or did she?

Uncertain of exactly *what* she wanted in those minutes, her hand tightened unconsciously on the edge of the island where she'd been working, unable to tear her gaze from where Vader had been standing moments before as an unwelcome conflict within her made itself known.

"Mistress Padmé?"

Threepio's voice broke into her confusion and she turned to look at him. From his body language and the tone of his voice, he was concerned. He knew she and Vader weren't getting along and, like the good protocol droid he was, kept trying to smooth things over between them.

"Is there anything I can do, my Lady?"

Blinking, she shook her head to clear it, trying to reconcile her feelings of disappointment with those of relief and unable to settle the disquiet that had slipped into her soul. Did a part of her, even a small part, really *want* Vader to find Luke and Leia? "No, Threepio, but thank you."

"You are welcome."

"Let's finish making this." Forcing a smile, though she didn't really know why, Padmé nodded to the stove. "You'll want to stir that or it will scorch."

"Oh! Of course." He turned to do just that, his back to her once more. "Are you certain you do not wish to add more to your salad? There are some very fresh vegetable in the cooler that would add variety and flavor to the dish."

Unwilling to argue with him, Padmé agreed but returned to shredding the greens for her salad, sliding onto the stool as her gaze went back to the doorway and the man who'd been standing there. His words replayed in her mind almost as much as the pain and anger behind his declaration that he'd *not* found the twins. The relief she'd felt at the time returned, accompanied once again by the disappointment except this time it expanded from a knot to a clenching of her stomach as it was going to rebel.

She swallowed hard, deliberately turning her attention back to her salad.

Threepio began to chatter, as he often did when things got quiet and he didn't know what to say, but Padmé wasn't paying attention.

The fundamental question of the hour whirled around her mind again; did she *want* Vader to find the twins? Unsure of exactly *what* she wanted in the face of her reaction to his news, it made her distinctly uncomfortable. If she didn't know what she wanted anymore, however would she be able to resist and refuse his continued determination with any kind of force?

Pushing herself away from the stool, she turned to the cooler and pulled out the vegetables she was going to add to her leafy appetizer and focused instead on that. Her thoughts about

Vader had become dangerous and unpredictable and she couldn't afford to dwell. Doing so was too dangerous.

Month Twenty Five, Day 9 PEF

Update is a day early; tomorrow is my husband's birthday

Chapter 72

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Five, Day Nine PEF

Evening

Tedious.

Vader reviewed the next segment of Threepio's memory files, the holo recording a badly corrupted mess of static and fuzz, interlaced with snatches of conversation that were so horribly garbled they didn't come through properly.

He'd been through a lot recordings like that one and skimmed through several long minutes before pressing the keys that would send it for data retrieval, if it was possible. The computer program he'd written — with Artoo's help — for it was highly sophisticated and designed to reverse memory wipes, but he still doubted he'd be able to make much sense of the information. Whatever holo Artoo had suggested he seek hadn't yet presented itself.

I'll know it when I see it; sure. Right. I'm going to mangle that bucket of bolts! Vader fumed silently, pressing the seek button and allowing the computer to find the next uncorrupted segment. *According to the time stamps on this garbage, we're four days into her coma!*

Shaking his head, he turned back to the computer and the files he'd set to be retrieved before retiring the night before.

After his disappointment over the found twins not being theirs, he'd locked himself in his office after a brief and intense spat with Padmé where Threepio had drawn his wrath when the droid had tried to intervene. He'd been expecting a fight after emerging from the 'fresher and he'd gotten it.

Knowing he couldn't please Padmé by finding their children, he'd instead embarked upon a different kind of torture; he'd begun reviewing Threepio's corrupted memory files. The amount of data he'd retrieved from the droid was staggering. There were whole segments of uncorrupted data, but none in the memory logs Artoo had suggested.

Despite the pain she continued to cause him with her refusal to accept his search for their twins, he couldn't abandon it and wouldn't. She'd come to accept it eventually simply because she had no other choice, but in the interim, he knew he had to do something to help her see that she could turn to him more often than just when she was at her lowest.

Artoo's suggestion, thus far, had wasted a whole day; a day where his only contact with the bridge had been a short, "Things are proceeding as planned, Lord Vader; construction is on schedule and we believe Lady Ventress has eliminated the last of the resistance pockets with her return; still no word from the Hutts," report from his General.

He'd made no reply other than to leave instructions to contact him immediately when the situation with the Hutts changed. He also sent Asajj a coded disc with the locations his spies had supplied of two more Jedi on nearby planets; Nal Hutta and Lannik.

If he'd known Lannik had been harboring a Jedi when he'd gone to look for the twins only to be disappointed, he'd have dealt with the situation himself. It would have been far more satisfying to repay a *Jedi* for their betrayals than waste his time 'training' with Asajj.

His instructions to the adept, recently out of bacta and back on the front lines, had been curt. "Remove the Jedi swiftly and bring me their lightsabers. If you find the slicer on either planet, I want him alive."

She had acknowledged her new instructions and, to his knowledge, had set out immediately. The Jedi would have been eliminated if for no other reason than Asajj had a hatred for them that surpassed even her fear of *him*, but with the 'swiftly' included as a part of her instructions, she wouldn't be able to take her time. For now. The Jedi needed eliminating, as did the slicer — but the slicer wasn't a threat to the Empire; just Vader's good humor.

Besides, he needed the sabers to be included in his courier to Palpatine; he'd been slacking on his hunt for the Jedi since Padmé had arrived regardless of Asajj's enthusiasm for it.

Turning his attention back to the fractured holos running across his desk, he sent another batch into the data retrieval program.

Keeping the door to his office closed, for he had no wish to upset Padmé should he find something that caught her attention, he'd begun to review the corrupted data the evening before. Whatever Artoo had found, it wasn't here. Calling up the repaired files on his desk console, he selected the first one and pressed play.

Ignoring the video, he played the audio only, hearing Padmé say his name but it was breathless and weak. He frowned, shaking the impact off and pulled up the records of the Jedi he'd been supplied with; locations including a fresh one on Toydaria he was going to have to track down on his own.

Scanning through the information his lips curled. A Twi'lek, big surprise, that he'd not worked with during his time with the Jedi. It had been a while since he'd engaged one of the traitors and he wasn't about to pass up the knowledge that one of them was here and leave it to Asajj; why should she have all the fun?

A scream, *Padmé's* scream, brought his head up as if he'd been shot. Eyes wide, he turned to the holo recorder and stabbed a button without realizing he'd intended to, playing back the video.

Nothing in the holo registered beyond the pained expression of his wife; of her suffering. She was stretched out on a table, her back arched, her head tilted back as she screamed *his* name. He heard her call, *felt* her agony as if it were his own; listened to her beg and plead, but it was the desolation on her face that held him riveted; the sorrow and desperation.

It wasn't until he heard her gasp Leia's name on a sob that Vader realized exactly *what* he was watching; his wife on an examination table and a newborn baby in the arms of a droid.

The birth of his children.

The day his wife had fallen into a coma.

He paused it, reaching out to hesitantly touch the image of her contorted face, tracing the line of her cheek as if to ease her suffering; riveted before he mentally shook himself. Then, before he could think better about it, quickly rewound the holo to the beginning and watched it through. The uncorrupted segments started further back than expected and he played it through only to be no less absorbed, though a little less focused on Padmé — but not by much.

Now, with the video from Threepio's perspective, it moved through the corridors of the Nabooian cruiser after a Jedi Vader would have known anywhere. His hand tightened on the edge of the desk; this was the man who'd stolen his wife after Mustafar. The man he'd believed he'd killed — and was in fact, very much alive.

The holo, if nothing else, was proof of that.

He was still silently seething when Padmé's voice sounded, the Jedi leaning forward and down, her figure obscured.

"Obi-wan..."

Vader's heart lurched in his chest at the wan tone in her voice, his eyes widening, guilt slamming into him as Obi-Wan shifted, giving Threepio a clear view of his mistress. She lay on one of the medical beds, her braid hanging down off the side, her eyes half open as if in pain. One hand worked weakly at her side even as her posture spoke of an agony she couldn't comprehend.

An agony that wasn't strictly physical.

Obi-Wan's hand reached out to trace her brow, the image flicking, but his face remained obscured and out of Vader's view; it wouldn't have mattered anyway. His attention was riveted solely on his wife.

"Is Anakin all—"

Static cut off her question as it hit a part of the file that couldn't be recovered, but Vader didn't need to hear the rest of it; the concern in her features spoke volumes. She'd been worried about *him* when she should have been worried about herself. Wishing he could somehow go back and assure her he was fine, that he loved her still; that he was sorry, so sorry for having hurt her...

He shook off the useless wish, knowing that the past was past; Padmé had loved him still despite his attack on her. This proved it; that she'd been able to ask about *him* when she'd been flicking in and out of consciousness said more than any admission of hers would.

The next few were holos of Threepio flying the ship, a recording of his own voice ordering Threepio to take care of Padmé because he'd been recalled to Coruscant immediately and that he'd meet her and the baby there later. There was also another one of Obi-Wan, now in the co-pilot's seat, programming the nav computer.

“But sir, Master Anakin was very specific; Mistress Padmé is to be—”

“Change of plans,” Obi-Wan told the droid shortly. *“She needs medical care and quickly, we’re going to P—”*

Static cut the short clip even shorter, concealing the name of the base where they’d taken his wife. There were snatches of various other scenes, including what appeared to be a brief image of a moon base that was gone almost as soon as it played. He suspected that nothing, no matter how hard he studied the holos, would ever give him the name of the generic looking installation — an installation he’d soon realize, where his wife had given birth to his children.

The idle thought had no more crossed his mind, than a medical droid appeared, clear as day, in the center of the holo memory. The room beyond him was in clear focus with Padmé lying prone on the examination table. Details as to her condition were flicking above the table, a droid going through the results; to Vader they were backwards, but his gaze had caught and held on Padmé.

“Padmé,” unthinkingly, he reached for her, the holo fuzzing as his fingers passed through it and Vader caught himself, glancing about as if to ensure no one had seen him. Still alone in his office, he turned his attention back to the holo with a brief shake of his head; the medical droid appeared to be speaking with blobs; the peripherals on the holo weren’t coming through clear.

“We need to operate quickly,” it was saying. *“If she slips into a coma, she could die and take the babies with her.”*

Vader frowned at the holo crackled, distorted by an electronic buzzing noise and blurred, making it impossible to know who was speaking or what had been said.

“—rying twins,” the droid stated as the holo kicked back in. It floated back towards where Vader’s wife lay on the examining table. They were preparing her for labor; preparing to extract his children from her body; preparing to try and save three lives instead of just one.

The holo cut out again and he held his breath, the static making the shapes warp and distort, several figures moving around before the scene coalesced once more and he jerked as Padmé’s voice broke in once more, calling his name.

“Anakin?” Her words were weaker than before. Her hand trembled in the holo as she extended her hand towards where Threepio stood in the observation area, as if beseeching him as he watched the hologram. *“Anakin... please... I need...”*

Again, without thinking, he reached for her, his hand passing through the hologram. Desolation struck from nowhere; he couldn’t reach her, *hadn’t* reached her. He’d been too busy following his Master’s orders to return to Coruscant and *not* engage Kenobi while she’d been fighting for her life on that table.

Moments later, a pure, white hot rage detonated within Vader’s chest as his former Jedi Master stepped into the room, taking the steps Vader himself wished to. Moving to Padmé’s bed side; moving to offer her comfort and support. The image was clear where he might have wished it be fuzzy, devastating him as he took in the scene he’d so yearned to be a part of.

Obi-Wan with *his* wife.

Obi-Wan taking *his* place.

Obi-Wan taking *her* hand as he stepped to the side of the table, his expression concerned as he lay one hand across her forehead. “*I’m sorry Padmé; Anakin isn’t here.*”

“*Obi-Wan?*”

“*Yes?*”

She tried to lift her head, but Obi-Wan eased her back to the table; Vader couldn’t see her expression. “*What’s happening?*”

“*They need to operate, Padmé; your body is shutting down its support of your children. If they don’t do something now, they’ll die.*”

“*Children?*”

“*You’re having twins.*”

“*Tw... oh Anakin!*”

She sounded so lost, so shocked; Vader couldn’t tear his gaze away from the image of her face as she turned it away from Obi-Wan. Watching as the tears streaked down her cheeks, as her body convulsed as if curling in upon itself protectively would ease the pain. She sobbed his name again and again, begging Obi-Wan to find him, but the Jedi — ever stoic — instead held her hand through the ordeal as she was induced.

“*Anakin... Anakin!*”

Unbidden and unnoticed a single tear slid down his cheek as he watched the woman he loved labor to give birth to his children. Her body twisted and then heaved, caught in a natural cycle as old as the Galaxy itself; he’d never seen her in so much pain! It was as if the mental anguish was amplifying her physical discomfort and the medics, he heard, couldn’t risk giving her anything for it; they were afraid if they did, she’d slip away from them.

Threepio had been forgotten, a holo recorder no one had thought to remove, and he saw it all, the droid’s concerned gaze never leaving the event on the table. He’d had a clear view of Padmé’s face; of Obi-Wan’s unwavering support at her side. Obi-Wan had a clear view as Padmé’s body had convulsed as she screamed Anakin’s name, her vocal chords giving them a raw sound that wrapped his lungs in a vice like grip; a grip that threatened to strangle him.

“*Anakin.. Anakin help me!*”

It was his nightmare all over again; hearing her beg for his help and him unable to reach her, unable to do more than watch as she slipped away from him... watching her die.

Except she hadn’t.

His *wife* had labored without him, her sorrow in this happy moment a near tangible thing that sank into his heart like a vibro-blade through cloth. Quickly; easily — but not painlessly.

The birthing droid in the holo withdrew from beneath the shield around Padmé’s hips and legs, a squalling bundle in its mechanical arms. Obi-Wan’s smile was one of wonderment, a smile *he* should have been sharing with Padmé, not Obi-Wan, as he took the baby in his arms. Instead it was Obi-Wan holding his child; Obi-Wan holding—

The droid spoke, words Anakin didn't need translated — and neither did Padmé.

"Luke."

Weakly, Padmé lifted one hand and ran her finger across Luke's cheek, her trembling smile filled with a mixture of sorrow and pride; pain and love. Vader could see it reflected in the wall beyond her; Threepio's processors had caught the angle unexpectedly. *"Oh Luke."* It dissolved almost as soon as it came to rest, the pain of another contraction striking her unexpectedly and her hand dropped away from their son.

Luke.

His firstborn; his *son*, had briefly felt his mother's touch.

Vader's throat was closed, the emotional scene so poignantly raw, he gasped with Padmé as she did, but couldn't utter a sound as she convulsed, the birthing droid pulling a second squalling bundle from her body. Obi-Wan looked back to Padmé, his smile now tinged with sadness as the droid held the second child for her mother to see.

"It's a girl."

"Leia."

"No!" Vader half sat up out of his chair as Padmé's image suddenly gasped, choking and coughing as she struggled to breathe, never getting the chance to touch their daughter as she had their son. She clutched the sides of the bed, gasping, and turned her gaze to his former Master. Obi-Wan. There was a brief lull as she choked, struggling to speak, and Obi-Wan shook his head, his expression concerned.

"Save your energy."

"I can't."

Vader flinched at her gasped words, hearing the desolation within them even as they were underlined with sorrow and determination. Her breath caught on a sigh, a gagging noise coming from her.

"Don't give up Padmé"

If Obi-Wan had been inside Vader's head, he couldn't have vocalized his thoughts any better. Watching his wife as she struggled with the aftermath of his Force choke was one of the most excruciating things he'd ever done; an aftermath he could have stood not to see. Padmé's head lolled to the side as she momentarily succumbed to the exhaustion of childbirth and pain before rousing, a gasp escaping her lips, a cough coming from her abused larynx.

"Obi-Wan?" she rallied, her voice raw and hoarse but full of conviction. *'There's good in him.'* She gasped again, trying to finish, her breathing erratic. *"I know. I know there's... still..."*

"Padmé?"

Her head lolled to the side, her eyes closing and Obi-Wan's response was immediate. *"Medic!"*

The birthing droid was taken away, Luke handed back to be with his sister, as Obi-Wan stayed with Padmé. Reaching down, the Jedi grasped Padmé's hand as two alien medics and several droids congregated around the table. Hoses were brought out and an oxygen mask attached to her face immediately.

"Come on, Padmé," Obi-Wan urged, one hand on her face, the other clutching hers tightly. *"Come back to us; your children need you. Anakin needs you."*

Her body bowed, her chest expanding before being lost in the activity around the table.

"Clear this room!"

One of the Medics instructed and the image wavered as Threepio was grabbed, someone dragging him away. *"Oh dear."*

Even as he was being removed from the gallery, Threepio kept his gaze on his mistress for long seconds and then static claimed the recording.

Like a puppet with its strings cut, Vader sagged back into his chair, moisture sparkling on his cheeks as a trembling hand shot out to stab the button that would prevent the recording from continuing. His mind was spinning, running around and around the scene he'd just observed played out in the medical ward of wherever Obi-Wan had taken her.

Padmé.

In labor, begging for him.

Calling his name as she struggled to give life to their children.

Wanting *his* touch, not Obi-Wan's.

Believing in him even to the last.

He propped his elbows on his desk and covered his face with his hands, the last images a direct contrast to the ones previous; his wife fighting for her life because of what he'd done. Her body struggling to die, *wanting* to die because he'd lost his temper; because he'd *doubted* her.

Because he'd believed, for a single heartbeat, that she'd betrayed him to Obi-Wan.

"Padmé."

Her name was a broken whisper on his lips, the wetness under his fingers drawing his face back from its cradle as he became aware of it. Gently, he touched the single line of moisture and then stared at it when he pulled his hands back, rubbing it between thumb and fore finger.

A tear; an unbidden tear.

Amazing. He hadn't known he *could* cry anymore. When was the last time he'd...? It was an easy answer; the day he'd learned of her death, believing their child dead along with her. And he'd raged, despite the tears on his cheeks, lashing out at the galaxy that had stolen her from him too soon.

The holo, like nothing else, brought home the fact that he *could* have lost her; instead of a coma, she could easily have died on that operating table. In fact, they'd perpetrated the lie she

had died for his benefit.

Sweeping one hand out angrily, he sent the items on his desk skittering from the surface. He'd have liked to get his hands on those responsible for that deception!

And Obi-Wan!

He closed his eyes, leaning back in his chair as he lifted his gloved hand to obliterate the trace line on his cheek. Staring at the ceiling, he saw the birth of his children behind his mind's eye, could *feel* the despair in their mother and, unable to help himself, he reached out blindly, selected the proper controls... and watched it again. His mind was still numb as it whirled around the *why* he had found the files in the first place.

Was this what Artoo felt he needed to see?

It was only the second time through, as Luke's cry pierced his office again, that Vader turned to look. When Leia made her appearance, held in the arms of the droid, he paused the holo and realized only then what he was really seeing beyond the damage his actions and caused and the birth of his children.

His children, his *family*— without him.

It was a long, long time before Vader emerged from his office and, when he did, it wasn't to search out his wife, but to find the droid who'd recorded the footage. He still had questions that couldn't be answered by video and only one other person than Padmé had been present. And *she* hadn't been in any shape to remember anything.

Padmé was absorbed in a holo vid, once again ignoring him, giving Vader a chance to collect Threepio with a motion the droid was to be silent — which was surprisingly followed. Leading Threepio back to his office through the outside corridor, Vader waved him in and then closed the door behind him.

"Is there some way I can be of service, Lord Vader?"

Crossing his arms over his chest, Vader regarded the droid for a long minute. Long enough that the protocol droid shifted his stance and cocked his head.

"Sir?"

"Do you have any conscious memory at all of the time I downloaded, Threepio?"

"A few, sir, but there are limited to what was not—"

Vader held up one hand, cutting him off. "Do you remember the day Padmé slipped into her coma?"

"Only bits and pieces, sir," Threepio sounded almost apologetic. "I *well* remember Master Kenobi—"

"After you were removed from the room, Threepio," Vader's tone was even. "What do you remember after you left?"

"Very little I am afraid, sir; fragments mostly."

“What *do* you remember?” Vader watched his creation, still reeling from the sight on the holo, the recovered memories of the very droid before him. “And nothing about Obi-Wan.”

“If you insist, sir, but he *was*—”

“Threepio.”

“Very well. I remember feeling helpless, sir,” admitted the droid. “You had left me instructions to look after Mistress Padmé and I failed to complete them.”

Vader waved away that confession; he’d heard it already and absolved the droid. “What about her coma; were you there through that?”

“I am afraid there was little information supplied after I was removed from the medical bay,” Threepio informed him apologetically. “I have some recollection of continuing to serve Mistress Padmé for quite some time. However, only Master Ken—” there was a pause, Threepio seeming to remember that Vader didn’t want to hear about the other Jedi belatedly. “There was only one visitor to see her, Lord Vader and it was not for long; I tended her myself as best I could until she regained consciousness. I am afraid that my memory sectors are so corrupted and fragmented, I cannot say with any degree of certainty how long that was.”

“Six months.”

“Six months!” Threepio sounded aghast. “My *poor* Mistress!”

“Were the medical personnel capable, Threepio; did they take good care of her?”

“I believe they did what they could at the time, Lord Vader, but it was not Coruscant.”

“Do you know *where* they took and kept her?”

“No, sir. The Jedi set the course. I was simply a passenger and not privy to that information.”

“What were you told; anything you can remember, Threepio; impressions, observations. Anything at all.”

“Well, sir, I *was* informed of her general prognosis when I was allowed to return to the viewing corridor after the delivery; it was not good. I was told by one of the medical droids they wanted to keep her for observation. Knowing how Mistress Padmé would have felt about being on display like that, I *insisted* they move her immediately to a private room. As Mistress Padmé could not speak for herself and you had left me in charge of her welfare, I persisted even after they told me it would not matter.”

“Why?”

“The medical droid did not believe she would recover.”

“Not recov—” Vader pinched the bridge of his nose, rubbing his eyes; they stung from the emotional ringer he’d been through since finding that holo. “Is that why they decided to pretend she was dead?”

“I am told it was a ruse for *you*, sir. To make you believe she and the children were beyond your grasp. I do recollect that I tried to explain that you would *never* harm Mistress Padmé or

your own—”

“Explain to who, Threepio?”

“The Jedi, sir.”

“Kenobi?”

“Yes, sir. I do remember he was very adamant to the contrary and most assuredly *against* the idea. I do not know why.”

“Did he play a part in deciding to take the twins away from Padmé?” If he had, it was but another reason for Vader to track him down and kill him. Aside from the fact he was a traitor and owed Vader a rematch.

“I do not believe I was privy to that meeting, Lord Vader.”

“Do you *think* he did?”

“I do not think so, sir. He was most concerned about Mistress Padmé. I believe he attempted to use the Force to wake her.”

Indicating, Vader supposed, that Obi-Wan had tried to wake her *before* the individuals who’d taken the twins could spirit them away. Much as he wanted to track down his old Master, Obi-Wan wasn’t the focus of his inquiry; he let the comment pass. “How was Padmé’s recovery from what you remember, Threepio? Were there complications? Unexpected setbacks?”

“Her recovery was very difficult, sir, with many setbacks. I know for certain that we almost lose her once but I was able to summon the medical droid in time.” Vader’s breath had caught and he release it shakily as Threepio continued, seemingly unaware that his Maker was on thin emotional ice. “Whatever had caused her condition did not appear to be physical. Even the medical droid was puzzled by her symptoms; Mustafar’s toxic atmosphere should not have inflicted the kind of injuries she had. From what I understand, if she had been conscious, she never would have survived. The damage to her throat was extensive.”

“How extensive?”

“Burst tissues; as if she had swallowed a sonic grenade according to one observation. It was *most* distressing. The lacerations were acerbated by the delivery of the twins.”

“How is that possible?”

“The medical droid cautioned her to avoid speaking if at all possible; to remain silent. She did not.”

Because she’d been calling for *him*. Vader slumped against the door as if Threepio had sucker punched him; in a way felt he had. Not only had he given Padmé her original injuries in his jealous rage, but his absence had only made them worse.

Threepio seemed blissfully unaware of the impact of his words and continued, his tone surprisingly cheerful. “For all it was most distressing, the coma did do her good, sir; it allowed her body to repair itself. It is most impressive what the human body can—”

“Threepio.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Do you know *who* kept Padmé where she was for so long? Who, other than Obi-Wan, ordered her not to be returned to Coruscant for care?”

“I *am* sorry, sir. I wish I could be—”

“You’ve helped enough; thanks, Threepio.”

“You are most welcome, sir.”

Vader stepped aside and let the droid pass before the door slid closed behind him and it was then, when he was finally alone again, that Vader let the impact of everything he’d seen, of everything Threepio had told him, really hit. He sank down to the floor, tilting his head towards the ceiling without seeing it. Closing his eyes, he exhaled softly.

What next?

He didn’t know; he didn’t even know where to begin. All he knew was that his plan to reach the woman who’d been his wife had suddenly taken a drastic shift to accommodate what he’d just learned. What he’d just seen. The agony she’d been through *because* of him... it didn’t change everything, but it certainly forced him to consider a new angle on his actions. To look at the consequences

And Vader, for all the ends had justified the means, didn’t particularly like what he saw.

Month Twenty Five, Day 10 PEF

Author's Note: The astute of you will notice that this update is shorter than others have recently been. I'll apologize for that right now and for this.

IMPORTANT!

Life has decided to jump in and play havoc with not only my free time but my ability to continue giving all you wonderful folks quality updates will be compromised as I work at getting my next original novel to the editing phase and dealing with my brother's wedding — that more than anything will be taking up my time and I apologize in advance.

Depending on how things go, I *hope* this will only be on hiatus for the next month, but to be safe we'll say two. So, in short:

YLMWID will be going on HIATUS for the next two months — Until June 2012.

If I have time and brain power to write for this demanding fic, I will update, but it is by far the most complex fic I have ever written and requires something no other fic does — real attention.

Reviewers: I can't thank you guys [gushing or constructive criticism and everything in between] enough for taking the time to read through this story [I know it's massive] and then leaving me a note, even if it's just a few words, as to your thoughts. I know I don't say it enough, but I really do appreciate it. Those of you that get what Daenarrah and I are trying to do by making them 'real' really get it and we can't express how much that means to us!

If we haven't said it before, I'm saying it now: Thank you everyone for reading, if you respond or not :)

Chapter 73

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Five, Day Ten PEF

Afternoon

Escaping the duties on the bridge soon after the first shift change, Vader retired to his office, worried about his wife. After finding the holo of the birth of the twins, watching as she'd suffered the aftermath of his Force choke and speaking with Threepio, he wasn't too certain how to handle her today — especially after she'd refused to sleep again the night before.

Fortified, apparently, against the nightmares from the sleep she'd obtained when he'd joined her on the sofa, she'd spent the night once more standing at the viewport staring out into space. He'd not approached her, unsure even after she'd asked him to stay, if it had been a fluke or if she'd really started to accept his comfort. Especially after their brief, but intense, argument after he'd returned from looking for the twins.

She hadn't, after all, asked for him again; but neither had she denied him.

Their discussions since Empire Day had centered mostly about her lack of eating or the twins, or lack thereof, in their lives and — ever the volatile subject — he wasn't about to show her the holo of them being born; not yet. It had been a traumatic time for her and would serve as a reminder of what he'd once done.

The last thing he was willing to do was set her back to before she'd accepted his help; he was only starting to make progress with her and wasn't about to sacrifice it for a memory that was best forgotten.

So he'd left her by the view port, staring out into space with little more than a greeting she chose not to return and went to work. Her confusion since he'd told her about Cleek's false lead had colored most of her moods, as if she was no longer certain about something — which was a better, he supposed, than having her dwell on the twins all the time.

Yet, he got the sense she was.

The confusion was new and he had no idea what she was so confused about; she hadn't chosen to share and he hadn't pushed. Couldn't. Not after viewing that holo. No after being a spectator when he should have been a participant.

Taking the day to catch up on some much needed report work with the General finally in one of his elements directing the deployment of troops and supplies, Vader left the interior door to the suite open in case Padmé needed him. He might not know what to say to her or how to deal with the echoes of an emotional shock equivalent to pulling a high gravity turn without inertial compensators, but he wasn't going to deny her his company if she wanted or needed it.

He could also, he admitted to himself ruefully, check on her from time to time to see if she'd made any progress on the dry meal Threepio had left for her on the coffee table. Thus far, nearing noon, he'd not yet seen more than a single cracker removed and it worried him.

She still wasn't eating as much as she should; better, but nowhere near enough.

With her health as his primary concern, he had no desire to show that kind of vulnerability to his crew. She was eating up almost all of his cognitive ability with worry and frustration and, unless he was needed, he didn't see it necessary to be on the bridge. Let the crew think what they wanted; most, he knew, suspected he was interspersing his hard work with some wife-like play time; those who knew of her presence at any rate.

Who was he to disabuse them of their notions — especially when it couldn't have been further from the truth? It wasn't a truth anyone under his command would learn any time soon.

The paperwork was tedious, file after file being sorted into his system as he added notes or suggestions, sometimes re-writing sections; all items that would eventually make their way into the military archives and he had no desire to have something in them that could be damaging or dangerous to him.

Part way through a detailed report from one of the front line commanders regarding a particularly difficult strong hold on Toydaria, the comm. line sounded and he reached out to stab it without looking and answered almost absently. "Vader."

“My Lord,” the General’s voice came through clearly. “My apologies for the interruption, but I have urgent news from the planet.”

Vader’s head jerked up, his gaze going immediately to the open doorway between him and Padmé, and flicked his fingers at it to close it. She didn’t need to know about this; not with everything else on her mind. As the lock engaged, he turned his attention back to the comm. line. “What news, General?”

“A Jedi, sir.” the General’s tone was even. “Bismark company was able to get a signal to us before we lost contact.”

“Is Torrent company on the ground?”

“Yes, sir; they landed an hour ago.”

“Dispatch them to Bismark’s last known location immediately; they’ve dealt with Jedi before.” He was already on his feet, shutting down the programs he’d been using. A surge of adrenaline had coursed through his body at the mention of the Jedi; he’d been hoping Ventress was right but never really believed it.

“At once, my Lord. Shall I inform Lady Ventress and dispatch her to the area?”

“She’s been reassigned, General; I’ll deal with the Jedi myself.” Cutting the connection, Vader reestablished it in another direction. “Artoo, you’ve got five second to tell me the upgrades to my fighter are done and it’s back in one piece.”

The affirmative whistle made him smile; a smile that was more of a feral grin.

“Excellent. Prep for launch; we’re headed to the planet.”

Artoo toodled another affirmative as Vader pushed away from his desk. He strode for the door, keyed it open and headed for the flight deck.

A Jedi on planet. A Twi’lek Jedi he’d never met, but one that had evaded Order 66, sought refuge among the galaxy’s scum — for Toydarians were as low as they got. A Jedi; a representation of everything he’d lost; everything his wife had surrendered, had *stolen* from her. A representation of the evils of the galaxy; those who would sunder the system he’d help implement to save what little light there was left to be had.

Jedi; those, he realized with sudden clarity as he made his way to the fighter bay, who had to be at the very heart of his current predicament. Having seen Obi-Wan at Padmé’s side in the holo, it all made a maddening, infuriating kind of sense.

The Alliance, this so-call coalition of free systems, would never have had the audacity to hide his children from him, to take them from their mother, without the guidance of the Jedi. Right or wrong, it fueled his hatred for the order in a way it hadn’t before, driving him, pushing him, as he climbed into the cockpit and sent the fighter hurtling into space to jackknife towards the planet at a steep angle.

No.

The Jedi had to be at the heart of this. Only on their word, their *influence* would have been able to push the so-called free thinking beings who opposed the Emperor into this kind of

feat. They'd never have, he believed, been capable of executing and maintaining the deception otherwise.

His hands tightened on the controls, the ship diving into the atmosphere as he angled towards the planet and snapping him from his thoughts. "Check the dampeners, Artoo," he told the droid tightly, practically biting out the words, "The feedback is pretty strong."

The beeped acknowledgement accompanied a whirring of sound as the astromech did as instructed. Slower than he would have liked, but with surprising speed, the shake on the controls tapered off. Vader kicked the fighter into high gear, slipping it into the atmosphere like a sharp needle through flesh.

The star fighter was more responsive than he remembered as he was pushed back in his seat, powering through the sudden drag of the atmosphere as if it were space. Angling towards the ground, Vader checked the coordinates for the last known position of the Jedi, raking the ground with his lasers as he came upon a column of refugees.

Artoo cut the lasers after the first barrage, but the damage had been done, the fighter gone in a heartbeat and leaving nothing behind.

Vader let it go, his attention focused on the Jedi. The Jedi would pay for stealing his children. For tearing his family apart; for putting his wife through two years of mental anguish that threatened to break her. The Jedi would know it; break under his wrath and *would* tell him whatever he wished to know. The Jedi *would* pay.

The *traitor* would pay.

His thoughts were interrupted as he came careening over a mountain range into a forested area, a large plateau below holding a massive river that jutted over the edge into an enormous water fall. White armored bodies littered the area like fallen toy soldiers, a blaze of yellow light streaking here and there as the Jedi below ripped through the ranks of Stormtroopers. Flashes of blaster fire poured in from the ranks as the Stormtroopers received their reinforcements.

Right on time.

"Take over Artoo." Undoing his crash webbing, Vader gauged the distance and hit the hatch override without waiting for an affirmative, the canopy springing open violently. Passing near the ground with Artoo in control Vader catapulted from his seat. His crimson blade flared to life as he hit the ground with a roll, calling on the Force to dampen the effect of the landing even as he used it to boost his speed.

Using the ground as a spring board, he launched himself at the Jedi with a cry.

The Jedi whirled, her eyes widening even as her shining blade rose to meet his. She back pedaled even as she parried that first blow. "Traitor!"

His eyes flashed as he turned her parry against her, his blade slapping hers left and right before slamming her with a powerful Force punch/push combination. The Jedi stood her ground for a moment before succumbing to the assault, being thrown backwards to land several meters away as his hand impacted with the center of her chest.

Laser fire had died the moment Vader engaged her, Torrent and Bismark Companies standing at the ready, but holding their fire as she rolled to a crouch. Planting one hand on the ground, the other still firmly grasping her lightsaber, she stared at him. Breathing heavily, there was a wariness in her eyes, a knowledge that she was outmatched. That first assault had proven it; Vader could have killed her in that moment.

Stalking towards her, Vader's lightsaber slashed hard in a circle. "The Jedi betrayed the Republic," he told her shortly. "They betrayed *me*."

Leaping back in, the Jedi came in with a powerful overhead chop, followed up by a quick one two kick combination. Vader blocked the chop one handed while using the other to deflect the kicks.

"You turned your back on the Jedi," the Jedi accused, keeping a masterful reign on the fear he could feel spreading through her system. Not just outmatched, but overpowered, she hadn't a chance against him and knew it. "On everything you swore to protect!"

Parrying another series of properly exact attacks, knowing the Jedi was no match for him and thus, a waste of his time, Vader ended the match swiftly. With a spin and a slash, the Jedi cried out, Vader's legs sweeping both of hers as he ducked under her attack and drove her to the ground. Her lightsaber went flying, only to arc gracefully back towards Vader as he stretched out his hand.

Igniting the yellow blade, he stepped towards the prone Jedi and crossed the blades at her neck. "The Jedi stole the only thing I swore to protect," he told her evenly. "Tell me where they are."

"I'll never tell you anything," tilting her chin, the Jedi regarded him stubbornly. "No matter what you do to me, the Jedi will rise again and put an end to your reign of terror!"

"Jedi are always ready to die," he slid the blades further forward, watching her flinch and taking a wholly unhealthy satisfaction from it. She deserved the anticipation, the uncertainty of when the blow would fall. "Tell me what the Jedi did with my children — now!"

Obviously not expecting the question, the Jedi stared at him for a moment before she blinked as if never having seen him before. Vader struck in that moment, seeing, *feeling* that she knew nothing, and ended the pitiful excuse for a Jedi's existence with a flick of one wrist.

Hooking his lightsaber back to his belt, he left the corpse where it was and turned on his heel, the Jedi's lightsaber in one hand. "Commander."

A Stormtrooper wearing Commander's bars stepped forward. "Sir?"

"I trust there will be no further setbacks."

He snapped to attention and saluted. "No sir."

"Good. Dispose of.. *that*," he waved one hand at the body, "in view of the populace. I want no illusions as to the treatment those who would stand against us will receive."

"Immediately sir." The Commander saluted and waved two men forward.

Vader turned, surveying the plateau, casting a disdainful glance at the corpse of the Jedi. He hadn't been needed. Moments later and she would have been unable to withstand the combined barrages of Torrent and Bismark Companies. Still, the trip hadn't been all worthless; he'd discovered that the Jedi as a whole didn't appear to know Luke and Leia's whereabouts.

Kenobi was the key. His lips twisted into a snarl.

Kenobi; he should be *dead*!

Plucking his comlink from his belt, Vader flicked it on. "Artoo."

The droid answered with a squawk.

The sound of his fighter's engines drawing closer reached him and Vader strode forward as if to meet it. "Don't land," he instructed the droid, already having dismissed his troops.

Artoo toodled an affirmative, visibly angling for a low pass along the deck.

Gauging the distance and speed, Vader called on the Force once more and propelled himself into the air. Timing it just right, he landed in the cockpit and dropping into his seat as Artoo closed the hatch, the ship breaking for the atmosphere and the *Exactor* as he strapped on his crash webbing.

He took over control as the ship entered the upper layers, careening into space without so much as a whisper of the shimmy he'd have felt before.

"You've been busy, buddy," already having dismissed the poor excuse for a fight on the planet below, Vader turned his attention to the condition of his fighter; a subject that was far more interesting. The Jedi hadn't been of any use, except to provide a trophy for his Master as proof of Vader's ongoing assignment to destroy the remnants of the Jedi. "What'd you do to her?"

Artoo toodled a question and Vader grinned. "It's a good thing, Artoo; very impressive."

A relieved sound was quickly followed by a series of complex explanations Vader absorbed both by reading and listening. A listing of technical improvements and aspects scrolled across his screen and he whistled. "Wow, you really *have* been busy. Shields, thrusters, weapons, yoke controls, life support — is there a system you haven't touched?"

There was a disgusted sound in response.

Vader chuckled. "I'm sure the backup relays will cooperate when you've had a little more time, Artoo. Before we go in, let's have some fun."

Veering away, Vader put her through the paces, zipping around the *Exactor* with a series of precise maneuvers that few pilots would have been able to follow. Sliding through space without issue, the fighter responded to the barest of controls, forcing him to correct as he pushed her too far in those first initial moves.

Quickly mastering the sensitivity of the new yoke, he threw her into a spiral around the bridge deck and then sent her shooting down, pulling up abruptly in front of the viewport that led to his quarters. Sidling closer, he let the ship drift, zeroing in on the single port where his

wife stood and watched as she focused on it, on *him*. Her eyes widened and she took a step back from the port, staring at him in surprise.

He grinned, waved and then, grasping the yoke, waggled the wings of his fighter and threw it into a fancy “S” turn as it arrowed away. Heading for the hangar deck, Vader decided he’d had enough testing for the day and it was time to rejoin his wife. He’d gained her attention and while he still might not know exactly what to do to reach her after having watched the holo of her giving birth to their children, they could at least share a meal.

Maybe, if he was lucky, she’d tell him what was bothering her.

And, he reflected with a hollow bark of laughter as he brought the ship into the deck and landed, popping the hatch as he ran through the cool down sequence, *Wookiees might learn to fly*. “Take over, Artoo and then take her back to the shop and keep working on those secondary relays; good work.”

Artoo beeped an affirmative as Vader climbed from the cockpit. Exiting the flight deck without a word or look to anyone else, he headed straight for the deck where his quarters were located, past the guards at the door, and to the access to his office. Keying in the code, he walked directly to the desk and, without sitting, entered an encrypted line.

“Flight Deck.”

“Have a courier ship prepare for departure to Coruscant immediately,” Vader ordered as he placed the fallen Jedi’s blade on his desk. “Within the hour.”

Which would make it in the next twenty minutes or so.

“Immediately, my Lord.”

Keying off the comm, Vader turned to the desk and crouched, opening a panel on the side that he’d rarely found a use for. With Padmé having been in his office, he’d taken to keeping the trophies for his Master out of sight. Normally they were left in his office on the bridge on prominent display; he’d moved them to the compartment to prepare them for shipping.

Pulling out the other three blades, Vader opened one of the drawers and extracted a case he’d collected the day before while trying to distance himself from the holo he’d seen and sort through the turmoil it had caused. Throwing himself back into his work, even briefly, hadn’t helped.

Opening the case, he checked to ensure the blades were in the locked off position before sliding them into the packing, he ignored the way the material warped itself to accommodate the blades individual traits. Within moments he was done, closing and locking the lid as he keyed his comm.

“General.”

“Sir?”

“Send me a runner.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Taking a moment to ensure the combination on the case was engaged properly, he exhaled, his gaze going to the door that would lead back into his suite. The fight with the Jedi hadn't solved anything and had given rise to more questions than answers. Questions he wasn't certain his wife could, or would if she knew, answer.

The knock on his door from the main hallway several minutes later drew him from his thoughts and Vader left the case where it was before striding to the door to open it.

"Lieutenant Colonel Adams reporting as ordered, sir."

Vader stepped back and motioned to the case. "A courier is being dispatched to Coruscant within the hour. That case must be on it."

"Yes sir; I'll see to it."

"See that you do, Lieutenant Colonel," Vader intoned dangerously. "It would be very bad for your continued career if it is not."

The man blanched and nodded once, collecting the case with care before saluting and exiting the room. Confident the case would make its way to where it needed to be, Vader dismissed the thought from his mind.

Now it was time to try and have a civil dinner with his wife. Try, he realized as he headed for the internal door, being the operative word.

Month Twenty Five, Day 11 PEF

Author's Note:

I'm not officially off Hiatus yet — see my profile for more — but this chapter is ready and you guys have been a patient and understanding as saints... so — here ya go. Enjoy :)

Chapter 74

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Five, Day Eleven PEF

Mid-Morning

Dinner the night before had been a strained affair, partly because Vader still wasn't certain just how to treat Padmé and partly because she'd been reluctant to communicate with him. Her confusion and distress were still palpable, following her into the brief nap she'd excused herself to take when dinner had been finished.

His offer to let her use his room hadn't gone over well and they'd fought again before he'd retired to his office to look over more of the holos from Threepio's memory banks. He'd been reluctant to delve back into them so soon but confident no other shocks like the one he suffered remained.

What could possibly affect him as viscerally as watching his wife in childbirth?

It was how he found himself in his office the following morning with the holo recorder off, unable to watch anymore of the fuzzy, useless information and instead caught up on the goings on planet side. The door was open to the main suite in the event Padmé wished his company, but, thus far, she'd not sought him out.

Part way through a detailed report from one of the front line commanders regarding a particularly difficult strong hold on Toydaria that had finally fallen, the chime to his office sounded and he looked up, frowning. Glancing at his comm. line he didn't find a message waiting and instead cued up the camera outside his office.

Lieutenant Colonel Adams, the bridge officer he'd promoted just under a month ago for exemplary work and the runner the General had sent the night before, stood nervously outside. As Vader watched, the man ran a finger under his collar and eyed the chime again. It wasn't until the Lieutenant Colonel reached for the chime again that Vader pushed away from his desk.

Few people sought him on this level; few had access, but Lieutenant Colonel Adams had dared and didn't appear to be leaving any time soon. Heading for the door as the chime sounded a second and then a third time in quick succession, Vader was opening the portal.

Lieutenant Colonel Adams jumped back as the door opened, his eyes widening at what was no doubt a dark look on his face; Vader was in no mood to be interrupted. "This had best be important Lieutenant Colonel."

“L-Lord Vader, my apologies for disturbing you, but it couldn’t wait.”

“The case made it to the courier, did it not?”

There was a moment of silence as Vader watched the man blink, seemingly taken aback by the reference and had to consciously search his mind before nodding. “Y-yes, sir.”

Lifting one hand, he saw Lieutenant Colonel Adams flinch and then, much to his surprise, the man blurted something totally unexpected.

“It’s my w-wife, my Lord; I just got word she went into early labor and is asking for me. We’ll understand if you can’t let me go, but this is... it’s... it’s our first, my Lord.” Connor Adams swallowed hard, as if expecting to feel the pinch of Vader’s Force grip at any moment. “I-it would mean *everything* to my wife and I if I can be there, sir. I swear, my Lord I’ll n-never ask for anything ever again if you’ll but grant me the leave time!”

Vader’s hand closed about the frame of the door, gripping tightly, the Lieutenant Colonel’s words having triggered an echo in his mind of the holo he’d watched repeatedly of Padmé delivering their twins; of how he’d yearned to be there. Of how she’d called for him; *begged* for his presence.

The Lieutenant Colonel had been trying, he couldn’t have picked a better sore spot.

It smarted something fierce to think that this man had the chance to be there when his child was born, but Vader had been denied that privilege. His first urge was to do exactly as the officer expected; to deny him the time. To deny him as Vader had been denied... except, because of that holo, Vader felt the briefest flash of empathy for the man. There was a feverish worry in the Lieutenant Colonel’s eyes that Vader could well understand; he’d felt it himself the first time he’d seen Padmé on the delivery table in the holo.

It was, in the end, what decided him.

“Enough, Lieutenant Colonel,” Vader told him shortly and the man, thankfully, shut up. With everything he knew about the man thanks to his personnel file — loyal citizen of the Empire, reliable and competent — he knew the man would return as soon as he was able. That, and he would now have a family to care for. His words were grudging and gruff. “You have your time. Go.”

There was a moment of stunned silence, the man looking as if he’d been struck over the head. “Really — sir? You mean it?”

Vader, surprisingly, overlooked the fact the term of respect was added as an afterthought. “Your wife needs you, Lieutenant Colonel; I’d not waste your time at my door.”

“You have no idea what this will mean to her, to *us*, my Lord!”

“I expect to see you back at your station by the end of the week.”

“Yes sir! By the end of the week, sir!” The man’s smile was nearly dazzling as he spun and took off at a run, throwing his last words over his shoulder. “Thank you, Lord Vader; thank you very much!”

Watching the Lieutenant Colonel disappear around the corner, Vader frowned as he considered what he’d just done. He’d best not make a habit of *that*. Stepping back into the

room, he let the door close and turned, only to stop dead in his tracks as he took in the harridan in the doorway that connected his office to his suite.

Frowning, he noted the almost brittle air about her; the way she seemed ready to break, and concern swept through him. “Padmé?”

“How could you?” Her words were low, lethal, and holding a note he’d never before heard. “How *could* you, Anakin? How can you let *that man* go home to his wife and child when our children are somewhere away from us; when *our* children are missing because of you?”

Worried about the way she was working into the tirade, Vader approached her, attempting to soothe her temper, to explain and calm her down. “Now Padmé, I only—”

“You only what?” Fury rippled through the space between them; a feeling he was well familiar with. “Only wanted to make things *right*?”

She stepped into him, her fisted hands striking him in the chest, hard and, as they did, it was only then Vader was able to identify the note underlying her anger; hysteria. She struck him, again and again, her fists falling for each of the words she shouted in his face; each hysterical accusation pouring from her unhindered and uncensored.

“*This is all your fault!* How could you do this to me? *Why* did you do this; you said you loved me and all you did was leave me. You turned away, became a Sith and it’s all your fault! *All of it!* Why did you have to turn; why did you take my babies away from me?”

Vader flinched at her last accusation, but her irrational tirade wasn’t finished.

“This never would have happened if you’d just stayed a Jedi; if you’d never become a Sith. *None of it!* I’d still have my children if it wasn’t for you! They’d be here and we’d be a family; but it wasn’t enough. *You wanted more!* You had to save me from a future that wasn’t certain and you stole it instead! *You* did this, Anakin! *You took them away!* Because of you I’ll *never* see them again and no matter what you do to try and find them, you never will!”

“You don’t know—”

“*I know!*” she shrieked, tears streaking her face, her voice cracking. “I know because I *looked*, damn you! I’ve looked everywhere they could possibly be; I looked and I drew a blank and you for all your Sith powers won’t be able to find them anymore than I could. *It’s all your fault and you can’t make it right!* There’s *nothing* you can do that will make it right! Why did you do this to me, Anakin? *Why?*”

He had no answer for her.

“I want them back; I just want to h-hold them; tou-touch... I want... I...” She seemed to fold in on herself, her hysterical tirade ending as great heaving sobs tore through her chest and she slumped against him. “I ju— just w-want... I want them back!”

Vader’s arms came around her, clutching her close as the stress and turmoil within her seemed to suddenly overtake her completely. Easing her to the floor as she started to slip from his grasp, he knelt, pulling her into the shelter of his body as hers threatened to tear itself apart from the force of her weeping.

Her head was tucked under his as he braced her back with one knee, his arms holding her tightly against his chest even as her legs splayed at awkward angles she didn’t seem to feel.

Her hands clutched his shirt, pawing, grasping and kneading, as if in supplication.

“I want... I-I ju-just... I.” Her choked pleas went unfinished, but he didn’t need to hear the ends to know what she wanted. What she’d wanted since before she’d come back into his life. What her capture had prevented her, or so she’d believed, from getting. ‘My ba-babies,’ she blubbered, unable to stem the tide, her words muffled by his shirt. “My prec— precious... children!”

“You’ll get them back, my love,” he promised fervently, pressing his lips to her temple, hoping she could feel how desperate he was to help her as he rocked her back and forth. “I’ll find them for you, I swear it!”

He might as well have saved his breath.

Padmé either hadn’t heard him or didn’t care; he got no reaction from her, not even an angry one. She simply continued to cry, weeping as he’d never seen, as he’d never *known* was possible. No matter what he did — rubbing her back, kissing her, stroking her hair — she didn’t seem to be aware of being in his arms; of his attempts at reaching her.

“My babies... L-Luke... Le-Leia...! Mommy wants you... she just...” a violent shake caught her body and Vader tightened his grip, knowing he had to be bruising her with his strength, but she didn’t seem to notice.

Nothing he did appeared to penetrate the fog of her sorrow, the agony of her helplessness bleeding into him and feeding his own. She couldn’t help herself find the twins and he couldn’t help her deal with the overwhelming grief that had come pouring out of her when he’d done something *nice* for other expectant parents.

The total melt down came unexpectedly, triggered by an event that was, in all fairness, mundane; after the last five weeks in his company and fighting spiritedly with him, he’d never dreamed this would be its culmination.

No matter what he did, what he tried, she was inconsolable.

“Padmé,” his voice broke on her name as he his eyes burned with frustrated and helpless tears, his lips pressed firmly against her temple. Continuing to rock her in his arms, he closed his eyes as shudder after shudder assaulted her tiny frame. How such a small vessel could contain this kind of grief... how could she stand it?

Unable to help her beyond what he was already doing; Vader was at a loss. He’d never seen anything like this, never known it was possible, and didn’t know what to do. She didn’t seem to be aware of his presence as she shuddered and begged, only the occasional slip of his name as she pleaded for their children and for him, indicated she was, somewhere inside her mind, aware of it.

His legs were numb from his crouched position, his back aching, his fingers starting to spasm from the continued circular hard motion against her back by the time her tremors began to subside. Her hands were curled in his shirt, impossibly twisted and, as she seemed to quiet, Vader shifted his position. Sweeping his arms about her and pulling her close, he pushed to his feet.

Padmé made no noise, no objection, as he carried her through the doorway and back into their suite. Vader pressed his lips to her cheek, to the indent just above her cheek bone beside

her eye, but, as before, she made no objection, gave him no *reaction* as if she was unaware of her surroundings.

Much like he'd seen her during that first nightmare when she'd slipped into a catatonic state.

"Padmé."

The appellation of her name drew no reaction, no hint of recognition; again, it was as if she hadn't heard him. Settling her gently into the nest of blankets that were her bed, he arranged her as comfortably as he could, tucking her in with concerned care and precision as he laid her back against the pillows.

Her eyes were wide open and staring off into nothing, her pupils dilated as if she were seeing things he couldn't. And perhaps she was; or perhaps she'd finally hit her threshold and her mind had broken, giving her an escape she'd never before dared take.

Vader hoped not.

Brushing her hair back from her face, he settled on the sofa by her hip, bending in close. "Come back to me, Padmé," he murmured softly, the heavy pressure of tears still in his throat as he bent and brushed a soft kiss on her ear. "You're stronger than this, my love. You've come so far; too far, to give up now."

She didn't move, didn't react as he pulled back, and Vader cupped her face with one hand, stroking his thumb over her cheek as she continued to remain unresponsive to any stimuli, staring at the ceiling; at nothing.

Eventually it became too much for him.

He couldn't just sit there.

Couldn't wait idly as she fought her demons without him; couldn't watch as she possibly decided that *this* time she wasn't coming back to reality. He lifted one of her hands to his lips, brushing an intense kiss across her knuckles.

"I'll be in my office if you need me, my love." He told her, placing her hand back on the sofa beside her. "The door will be open; just call and I'll come, okay?"

There was no answer to his offer.

He pushed to his feet when she still didn't react, retracing his steps to his desk, but the report that had been so interesting and riveting before the Lieutenant Colonel's interruption and Padmé's meltdown no longer held any kind of appeal. Nothing he opened and quickly shut, did. With every word he tried to write, every document he opened, every *sentence* he failed to process, anger gathered in his chest, pushing back to the pain of Padmé's current condition.

Anger at those who'd dared steal his children from their mother.

Anger for the state she was in — at himself for being a so bloody powerful and unable to do anything to help her.

Anger that the false lead on the twins hadn't proven to be the right one; the one that could end his wife's suffering.

Anger that *he* wasn't enough anymore; that there was nothing he could do. Nothing she *wanted* him to do.

He wasn't in his office for more than twenty minutes before he was back on his feet and striding into the lounge, closing and locking his office door behind him. Anger cackled at his finger tips, the desire to vent it, to rid himself of the helpless feeling her condition had brought on, a pressing and necessary thing.

But not, he reflected reluctantly, if she was still suffering. If she was still in her catatonic state, he wouldn't leave. Wouldn't be able to bring himself to abandon her when she might snap out of it and need him again. Stepping to the sofa, he crouched beside her — and stared.

Her eyes were closed, her breathing even.

Obviously exhausted, the tracks of her tears stood out with stark clarity on her pale cheeks, she'd slipped into slumber while he'd been out of the room. Bending forward, he brushed a soft kiss over her brow, reassured when she turned fractionally towards the contact in her sleep. He added a Force suggestion to his kiss, using the contact and helping propel her beyond the realms of her nightmares.

Confident she'd be out for several hours, he pulled back, tucking another stray lock of her hair away from her face, and then pushed to his feet and headed for the door. "Threepio."

"Sir?"

"I'll be in my training salle; if Padmé stirs while I'm gone, contact me immediately."

"Stirs, sir?"

"I want to be here when she wakes up; she'll need me."

"Yes, sir."

"Keep a close eye on her, Threepio," Vader instructed as he opened the door. "I'll be back later."

"Of course, sir."

At the rate he was going through his most difficult practice droids, he'd soon need more. Perhaps it was time to give Artoo another project.

A brief, anger and frustration charged spin about his salle resulted in a lessening of his anger, but not his frustrations. Being helpless in the wake of Padmé's emotional traumas, unable to help her in any way, simmered and festered in his gut. It made him feel helpless; like he had while holding his mother in the Tusken Raider camp the night she'd died.

It was a feeling he'd sworn never to feel again — and he hated it.

Near Midnight

Padmé was on the way back to the lounge from the 'fresher when the sound of a baby crying brought her head about. Fully awake, or so she thought, the sound was unexpected. .

"Luke?"

The cry came again, this time from further off, as if the baby was being carried away. Taking two steps towards the main door to the suite, she cast about again.

"Leia? Where are you baby?"

A child's scream this time, drawing her around with wide eyed terror, and then Bail's voice seemed to echo within the suite.

"It's best you not know. For your safety and your children."

"No!" Padmé whirled again, sweeping the darkness for the source of that voice; it haunted her dreams far too often. That stern, uncompromising voice which had belonged to a man she'd once called friend. "Don't do this to me! *Please* — they're my *children*!"

"Padmé; we did what we thought was right."

A hysterical giggle escaped from between her lips. What they *thought* was right. What *they* thought was—

Her eyes snapped open, the dream still clutching her heart, the *sound* of her children crying out for her presence — a presence they'd never known or felt — plowing into her lungs like a durasteel fist. The brittle, meager wall of defense she'd manage to resolutely salvage after she'd woken from her collapse, crumbled like a sand castle in a wave, disappearing like it had never been, caught in the undertow of her despair. A sob caught in her throat, the *need* to lean on someone overpowering in the darkness.

To know she wasn't in this alone; that her grief was empathized with if not understood.

Nearly falling out of the nest of blankets she called her bed, she hit the ground without seeing the table she nearly knocked herself senseless on before pushing herself to her feet. It took a minute for her to take in her surroundings again, her tear filled gaze falling on the doorway between the main living area and the bed chamber.

Anakin.

Desperation slipped into her heart, the need to be with him overriding every objection to his presence. She stumbled through the suite, her throat burning with unshed tears as they refused to slip down her cheeks. Without pausing in the doorway to the bedchamber, Padmé slipped inside and didn't stop until she was standing at the side of his bed, clutching the bed post for support.

His presence was like a balm to her roiling emotions.

Deep in slumber, he lay in the middle of the bed on his back, his bare chest rising and falling evenly as he was unaware of her distress. His brow twitched, creasing for a moment and then smoothing again.

"Anakin." His name passed her lips, a desperate whispered plea and, without shame, Padmé didn't even think as she crawled onto the near side of the bed, sliding under the sheet.

She didn't dare wake him, couldn't have dealt with any smug comment he might be inclined to make in her current state. It was only a small voice of caution in the back of her mind that stayed her hand when she would have wrapped her arms about him instead of herself. Curling up, she wrapped her arms about her own middle. Closing her eyes, she inhaled his scent, desperate to banish the memories, the nightmares, but it was the *sound* of Luke and Leia's cries that shredded her heart and had driven her to his bed.

Her children.

Her lost...

She swallowed a sob, squeezing her eyes tightly shut in an effort to block it all out.

Beside her, Vader's brow puckered in slumber as agitation and anguish penetrated his own dreamless sleep. Darkness surrounded him, encompassed him, but *she* called to him. Her presence was like an electric field that played havoc with his senses, beckoning him.

Padmé.

The darkness began to lift, calling him towards wakefulness as something seemed to real, to *raw* regarding the emotions and the disturbance. The distress underlying that anguish was like a beacon he couldn't ignore. His eyes snapped open, taking in the room without turning his head, and his gaze immediately collided with the curled up form of his wife lying on the bed next to him.

Her head was just barely on his pillow, her body held several long inches away from his with rigid intent even as her arms were tight about her own waist. She was biting her lip, her eyes squeezed shut as she gasped softly for breath, visibly shaking and struggling for control.

Somehow he wasn't as surprised as he should have been to find her so close; not after finding her on his floor several days earlier; not after the way she'd collapsed in his arms barely twelve hours ago. Rolling to his side, he reached out, gently touching her cheek as he said her name. There were no recriminations in his tone; nothing but genuine concern. Whatever had happened to drive her into his bed was serious.

"Padmé?"

Her breath caught in her throat, her eyes slowly opening and tears glittered on her lashes as she lifted luminescent brown orbs to his. His heart squeezed painfully as he gently brushed her hair from her face to see her better. She didn't say anything, simply looked at him with all the misery and despair she could no longer contain without assistance.

"You had another dream."

"I want them to stop," she confided brokenly, the anguish in her voice making it break. 'I want them to go away. I'll do anything... give anything.' Her breath shuddered out of her on a dry sob, desperation coloring her words. "Make them go away; use the Force and make them stop... *please*. Anakin; make them stop!"

If only he could.

Knowing that none of his powers worked the way she needed, the way she wanted, he couldn't find the words to soothe her, to reassure her. Instead he did the only thing he could

think of; he reached for her. She needed him, had come to him and it didn't even occur to him that she might reject him this time.

"Come here."

His murmured offer seemed to be a trigger.

With a soft cry she slid into his embrace, burying her face in the curve of his neck as the tears she'd been holding back let go. Her body aligned naturally with his, and he tucked her close, rolling to partially cover her with his body, symbolically shielding her from anything that would harm her. She curled closer, as if wanting to be absorbed, to be taken within him.

Ducking his head, he squeezed his eyes shut as he lay it against hers, able to feel the fragility of her body as much as her emotions in that moment. She was brittle, both in mind and body, and a part of him was afraid he'd hurt her — except it was she who burrowed into him, tucking herself beneath him as her tears washed his skin.

"Padmé," her name was a whispered anguish, a vocalization of his own feeling of helplessness to see her in such a state. Offering her comfort the only way she'd thus far accepted, he rubbed one hand down her back, stroking her hair.

It wasn't as bad as before, but in some ways it was worse. As if she was broken without a way to be fixed or a way to be healed. After her earlier breakdown, Vader was at no more of a certainty as to what he could do other than hold her.

Slowly, ever so slowly, her tears ebbed and Vader drew back as she stopped shaking, her grip on him slackening. Tilting his head to be able to see her in the dim light of the room, he blinked, surprised to see she'd fallen asleep. He went to move, to ease away fractionally so she'd be more comfortable, only to have her arms tighten around him. As she were if loathe to surrender even an inch of space.

Space, he realized with sudden insight, her subconscious mind couldn't give because it would allow the thoughts and dreams a chance to gain purchase. Ducking his head, he tightened his grip on her once more, pressing a soft kiss to the top of her head, and then shifted a little so not to crush her.

Closing his eyes, he curled carefully, protectively, about her, and surrendered back to sleep.

Month Twenty Five, Day 12 PEF

Author's Note: I'm still not officially back but I've found a little time to write here and there over the last months.

This chapter has been a long time in coming and is, as you will all note, something of a turning point in the story. I debated posting this since I don't know when life will give me the time and peace I need to finish the next chapter — it's a very intense writing experience — but I felt this has waited long enough.

That said, it needs to be posted and it's *long*. Almost 8K words long [a dual chapter if you will *grin*] as I'm now going to try and keep “daily” events in the story in the single chapters they should be [unless absolutely necessary] :) It creates less confusion.

So... here's chapter 75 :)

Thanks for your patience.

Chapter 75

Vader's Flag Ship Exactor — Month Twenty Five, Day Twelve PEF

Morning

Vader woke several hours later to find Padmé still tucked against his chest and in his arms, her lashes half-moons of darkness against pale cheeks. The bruises under her eyes were no less pronounced despite the fact she'd been in his bed and asleep for the last — he glanced at the chrono — seven or so hours.

Seeing her to be deeply asleep, and peacefully, for the first time since her return to him, Vader was reluctant to move even though he knew he had to. He lay watching her, the even rise and fall of her chest in her exhausted slumber reassuring even as it was frustrating. How long had it been since she'd slept more than a couple of hours at a time? How long had it been since she'd slept through the night itself, not plagued by nightmares?

She murmured something in her sleep, exhaling softly, she tucked her head back towards his chest. He waited until she settled again before reluctantly easing away, gently untangling himself from her arms. She made a half-hearted attempt to maintain her hold before curling into a ball as he was able to escape.

Having her in his arms all night had been an unexpected and sudden boon of her reoccurring nightmares; horrors she still hadn't shared other than to say they were about the twins. He suspected there was more to them than that, but until she confided in him, there was little he could do to help her; more to the point, there was little help she would *accept*.

This shadow of his wife was disturbing enough when he saw her day to day, watching as she lost what little weight she could ill afford to; watching as her skin stretched over bone and

muscle, her strength ebbing in ways he could *feel* but not see. To have her in his arms... he shook his head as he reached for his pants, slipping them on before he collected his robe.

He wouldn't be needed on the bridge today; with what few pockets of resistance taken care of and the Jedi eliminated and the General handling the logistics of setting up a garrison, he could afford to lounge a little. Still... he could put his time to good use and headed for his office.

Barefoot and bare-chested, he ensured the door was closed to the lounge before settling at his console. Calling up an encrypted channel, he sent a message to Cleek. To his surprise, the woman answered almost immediately — and her eyes widened fractionally as she took in his image before she offered a respectful bow.

“My Lord Vader; an unexpected pleasure.”

“I have information for you, Cleek,” he told her shortly, calling up the data he'd compiled on the twin's birthday. He'd been sifting through it himself, but Cleek needed to start following up the leads he felt should be investigated. He wasn't about to tolerate another example of her 'expertise' like the last time. “I'm transmitting the data to you now.”

The agent waited silently and then her eyebrows rose as the transfer commenced. “*You have new information, Lord Vader?*”

“The date of their birth; Empire Day. I've compiled a list of the most likely and started from there.” He selected a series of files to add to the transfer, masking his search criteria. “Hire more people; I want no more mistakes like the last time.”

“If I do, Lord Vader, we run the risk of attracting unwanted attention; I dare not make this operation any bigger if you wish continued discretion.”

Which he did; if Palpatine knew who he was searching for... Frustrated, Vader glared at the woman. “Then step up your search with what you do have. I want them found — *now!*”

“I'll need a day to two to peruse the search criteria and begin preliminary investigations into the information you sent me.” Cleek's admission was obviously reluctant, and she didn't appear to be looking him in the face, but staring at his chest. *‘I can dispatch an operative to each location as soon as we have that preliminary survey completed. It won't be long now, my lord,’* she promised. *“I'll inform you when we have something; Cleek out.”*

Pushing away from his desk, Vader made a sound of disgust. Cleek would need more information than he was willing to give her — like the fact the twins involved were *his* children — if he wanted to spur her to better efforts. He wasn't willing to make himself vulnerable to one of her type; not to mention the fact that if it was even *whispered* that he had children, Palpatine would hear of it and his chance of returning Luke and Leia to Padmé would be over.

No; he didn't dare chance it.

That didn't, however, mean he had to like it.

Exhaling his frustrations, he turned his attention to the next section of the data he'd pulled from the archives and began refining the list of places Cleek and her group of agents would

need to check. He worked for over an hour, letting his determination for a swift and decisive end to this quest override his anger.

It wasn't until he was calm again, having felt he was accomplishing something, that he finally shut the console down and went back into the lounge.

Padmé wasn't anywhere he could see and he headed for his room, surprised to find her still in his bed as he approached. Her back was to him as she lay on her side, the indent of her waist calling to his arms; the need to hold her after his morning's efforts welling up within him.

Taking a chance on the fact that she hadn't objected to his presence the night before, he slid back onto the bed. Mindful that he shouldn't push his luck, he discarded his robe but not his pants before crawling back under the sheets. She stiffened as he touched her, indicating she wasn't asleep as he'd assumed. Sliding his arm about her waist, and then gently drew her along the sheets into his embrace.

She had plenty of time to resist, to object or to roll away if she'd wanted; she didn't do anything. She said nothing and Vader looked down at her where she lay with her back to him, her eyes open as she stared into nothingness.

The quiet sadness that had enveloped her was still singing with the charged emotions of the night before, but they were once again muted. Suppressed by her indomitable will — or perhaps his presence? He didn't know; all he cared about was the fact that she lay quietly in his arms, accepting the embrace without fuss or fight as he curved his body about hers. Seeing her like this brought out his protective instincts and he had no desire to aggravate any of the issues between them by starting a discussion; especially not one where she might refuse him and hurt herself further.

Instead of saying anything, he pressed a gentle, lingering kiss to her temple, lay his head next to hers and closed his eyes.

The irritating buzz of his comlink woke him next from somewhere on his bedside table. His head shot up and he was instantly aware of the vacant space beside him. Frowning, he reached for the offensive instrument and flipped it on. "Vader."

"My lord, there's been a complication in the Toydarian capital. You're needed on the bridge, sir."

Of course he was; wasn't anyone able to do anything without him? Frustrated, he ran one hand through his hair. "I'll be right there, General."

Slipping his comlink into his pocket, he quickly dressed, sliding the glove onto his right hand, closing the fasteners as he exited his bedchamber. He spied Padmé immediately back at the viewport but there had been a major shift between them; he could feel it.

The hostility that normally surrounded her had faded to be replaced by... something. Something he couldn't identify.

Striding towards her, he stopped a few feet away to examine her profile. She still looked haggard, tired and worn out; he'd have liked nothing better than to take her back to bed for a week — and do nothing but sleep. Perhaps then...

He opened his mouth to ask—

And his comlink sounded again, the summons unwelcome in the silence and he watched her shoulders stiffen and then relax, an almost imperceptible sag. “Your Empire needs you.”

He frowned at the comment. Mild though it was, it was laced with disapproval. “I’ll be back later. We’ll talk then.”

She didn’t say anything, continuing to watch the world below the ship in the viewport and Vader turned with a shake of his head before heading for the door to the suite. Once this whole Toydarian mess was over with, he wasn’t invading another planet — no matter *how* necessary — until he’d had some uninterrupted time with his wife!

Afternoon

The mess on the bridge didn’t take as long as Vader was anticipating and while he couldn’t wait to get back to Padmé, he still didn’t know what he was going to say to her about that morning. He’d felt her withdrawing from him again, resisting his attempts to get closer, and it was both frustrating and disheartening. Needing some time to organize his thoughts, he collected Artoo and headed for his work shop.

Once there, he removed his glove and, collecting his tools, found the hover board he kept for his use and slid under his fighter.

Artoo toodled a question, coming over with a series of wires in his grasping arm and a holo of the system Vader was examining.

“I’m not avoiding Padmé — thanks.” Accepting the wires, Vader connected them to the appropriate joints, knowing Artoo would solder them on later. A hydrospanner was proffered in his peripheral vision and he accepted it, starting to loosen the bolts Artoo’s diagram showed had to come off to allow the addition to the system he’d upgraded that still needed work. “I should be there right now, but I don’t know what to do Artoo. I let Lieutenant Colonel Adams go home because his wife was having a baby and Padmé... Padmé didn’t take it well.”

Artoo’s question made him laugh, once.

“What do I mean by that? She had a meltdown, Artoo; I’ve never seen her like that. As if... as if...” he shook his head, unable to articulate what it was exactly. “I left Threepio with her.”

“If nothing else, he makes her smile.” He smiled faintly at Artoo’s blatted comment before it died again and he spoke abruptly. “She had another nightmare last night, one that was bad enough she climbed into bed with me.”

The surprised *whistle* from Artoo made Vader smile briefly as he put the first of the bolts he was removing aside. “If only! But no; not like *that*. She needed to be held. The closer she gets to me, the more I feel like I’m losing her, Artoo. I don’t know what to do.”

Another question came from the spunky astromech and Vader exhaled his frustration, spinning the next bolt free. “I’ve looked. If you were thinking that the holo of the twins being

born would hel—”

Artoo cut him off with an indignant blat.

“And just *what* do you mean by that?” Vader turned his head to the side to examine his friend, his eyes narrowed.

There was a series of whistles in explanation and Vader pulled himself out from under his fighter. Still on the board, he didn’t get to his feet.

“Distracted? Of course I was distracted! Didn’t you think I would be by the *birth* of my own children?”

Unexpectedly, Artoo’s arc welder jumped to life and an arc of lightning zapped Vader. He cursed, pushing Artoo away. “Dammit, Artoo, that stings!”

The droid scolded him, twisting its dome back and forth as if in distress... or disgust.

Vader, who’d been in the process of shaking his left hand to dissipate the sting of that bolt, stopped and looked up sharply. “Another holo?”

A few more whistles and beeps along with an affirmative noise followed.

“Gee I’m sorry, Artoo,” Vader returned caustically as he pushed to his feet, his anger making his movements jerky. “I guess I was a little side tracked by the one where Padmé nearly *died*. I should have just ignored it.”

The droid wailed mournfully, an apology.

“I know, I know.” Vader sighed, thrusting his hands into his hair and gripping, hard, before letting them fall to the side. “Just tell me what I’m looking for, buddy. Give me a hint. Something, *anything*; I’m getting desperate here. She’s slipping away, Artoo. I can’t lose her again.”

This time Artoo’s tone was subdued, as if realizing this was one area where Vader couldn’t be pushed, and he beeped a series of instructions.

“A holo that’s set while Padmé’s falling into her coma? I’ve seen it.” There was a raw note in Vader’s voice he refused to acknowledge; that sight had affected him far more than he was willing to admit, even to Artoo. “Threepio was there, Artoo; he watched it happen.”

The negative note that Artoo sounded was short and clipped.

“No? What do you mean no? I’ve seen the holo; I’ve watched it a dozen—” his voice hitched and he covered it with a cough. “There’s nothing else there.”

Artoo made a noise like a sigh and tried a different tactic.

“Listen?”

An affirmative bleep was his response.

“Listen to what?”

The astromech offered a timestamp and Vader sighed. “Fine. Here,” he pulled the data rod, containing the memory recovered and recompiled files from Threepio that he didn’t dare

leave anywhere but on his person, from a pocket and offered it to Artoo. “Play it for me while I work; maybe I’ll think of something.”

Artoo made a rude noise but accepted the rod, his inside whirling as Vader settled back to the hover board and slid back under the fighter.

Padmé’s voice was the first to greet him, the core of anger and pain in her words very much matching what he’d been exposed to since her arrival and he smiled faintly. She was talking about organizing a raid, something about a power core; her speech was well thought out, but even as she spoke, Vader was working on his ship and analyzing her plan.

He could see a few flaws, areas where a Jedi or Force adept would come in handy, but overall his wife had an excellent attention to detail and she provided everyone with three plans in the event the first or second didn’t work. The third plan was more of an escape route than anything else.

Letting her voice wash over him — but not *really* paying attention to the dialogue — he set back to work on the fighter. He pulled off the last of the bolts before removing the panel they attached. The new upgrade parts had been left nearby and he extended his hand, calling the canisters to him using the Force. He slipped them into the drive stream, hooking them up with expert fingers before adjusting the wires to allow for the power drain they’d inevitably cause.

He was in the process of slipping the last of the wires in place when Padmé’s angry tones froze him in place.

“—don’t want to hear about it, Threepio,” she was snapping. “I’ve told you already; I don’t want to talk about them until they’re found!”

Until they’re... the twins! He tuned back into the conversation, the holo of the system he was repairing still visible. Artoo wasn’t playing the visual component to the sound files at the moment and wouldn’t until asked.

Threepio’s voice was next, distress clearly audible in his own recording. “I assure you, Mistress Padmé, I would not bring them up if I did not think—”

“That’s just it, Threepio, you don’t think! You have no idea just how... how hard it is for me. Are you trying to make it worse?”

Vader closed his eyes against the saturated sound of Padmé’s voice. She was angry, yes, but more than that, he could recognize the same sense of desolation he felt from her daily. She was fighting emotion, anger and despair, and Threepio’s insistence had made it worse.

“Of course not, my lady,” the droid assured her, “I have no desire to make this more difficult for you, in fact I believe I have something you may wish to see.”

“Unless it’s my children in your arms reaching to hug me, there’s nothing I want from you, Threepio.”

“But I—”

“No buts. Do not ever speak of them again to me until I have them safely back in my arms, is that clear?”

With a wince, Vader heard Threepio give his reluctant compliance. “Pause that file Artoo.” The droid toodled his acceptance as Vader finished the connection he was working on and closed the panel, reattaching the bolts. Pushing himself out from under the fighter, he scooped a rag from the floor and rubbed his greasy hands. “Play that bit again — the fight between Threepio and Padmé — but this time show me what images are on file too.”

Artoo did as requested and Padmé’s angry countenance immediately sprang into his view. The recording was everything he suspected it would be; her expressions exactly the way her voice implied them to be. Except he saw through it now. He saw below the anger to the core of her frustrations and, in doing so, he could read her expressions.

Her stoic facade was similar to the one she’d often worn when forced to watch him go off to war in a crowd, but he could see through that as well. What she wasn’t saying came through loud and clear. Threepio having the gall to speak with her about her children hurt; hurt far worse than she’d expected. *Probably*, he reflected as he watched her order Threepio never to speak of the twins again, *because it was so unexpected*.

The holo ended with Padmé turning on her heel and storming away. Still, it wasn’t her image that held his attention or pricked his curiosity. “What did Threepio mean when he said he had something Padmé might want to see, Artoo?”

It was a simple, thoughtful question that got a reaction he wasn’t expecting.

Vader fell away in surprise, catching himself on outstretched hands behind him, as Artoo let out a squeal. His dome rotating as he suddenly fired his boosters and propelled himself several inches into the air with delight. He chittered, coming down to the ground with a *thump* before letting loose a series of squeals and beeps, turning in a tight circle and then stopping before Vader.

Collecting himself, Vader regarded his friend, his tone dry. “I take it that’s what you were trying to get *me* to see?”

An enthusiastic affirmative beep made Vader smile faintly as he pushed himself to his feet once more. “Mark that for me so I can find it when I get back.” Artoo made a sound before spitting out the data rod and Vader bent to collect it, turning it thoughtfully in his hand. “I hope you’re right about this, Artoo.”

Artoo’s confidence was infectious as the droid turned back to the fighter and Vader collected his glove before heading back to the private office connected to his suite. He left the door closed, knowing Padmé would be none the wiser for his presence, and slipped the data rod into the console.

Keying in the access code, he decrypted the data, pulled up Artoo’s bookmark and played the file again, this time without audio. It was a short clip but it obviously led into something else; something about the twins. Tapping the keyboard, he started a search for any related data, finding several pathways.

He found a discussion between Padmé and Threepio where she’d ordered him to stop looking after her, telling the droid that the only orders he should be following from then on were hers. He found a couple of other related arguments, carefully sifting through related data until he eliminated the pathways to their completion.

It was nearly dinner time before he discovered something crucial and, when the holo flashed into existence from where it had been buried and merged with another file as fragmented data, he froze.

Staring back at him was a holo portrait of the twins; Luke and Leia, barely hours old, lying together in a bassinette.

The holo shifted to a close up of their faces, revealing the details of their features — which were his and which were Padmé's; who took after which branch of their family trees.

Unlike the holo where Padmé had given birth, this was no wide angle shot, unable to be resolved into closer detail — and he knew; he'd tried.

This was an image, as seen through Threepio's eyes, of his children in their first hours of life; children who had never known their mother or father. Children who clung to one another with their little baby hands, seeming to draw comfort from the contact.

This was what Artoo had been urging him to find.

An image of the twins; an image Padmé could see even if she couldn't hold it. This was something tangible, something she could memorize, look at; *see*. This was proof; a *memory* she could build on. Faces she could give the children in her dreams.

His hands trembling, he took a few minutes to collect himself as the impact of what this image meant hit him. Unable to take his eyes off it, he reached into one of the drawers in his desk and pulled out a holo projector and recorder. Hooking it up, he transferred the shifting holo to disc. He made two copies; one for his own records, to go with the discs already hidden high on his shelf in the lounge, and one for his wife.

Taking a moment as he shut down his console, he exhaled and inhaled, the excitement over the find one he felt the need to share immediately. Padmé would be beside herself! Striding back into the suite, he opened his mouth to call her, only to pause when his gaze fell on the napping form in the lounge.

She was sleeping again — and that made him hopeful.

More and more he was finding that she was sleeping, seeming to snatch bits and pieces here and there and, over the last couple of nights when she'd turned to him, slept longer and better than she had in a long time. He'd sensed no nightmares, or rather, nothing as tangible as those that ambushed her when she tried to sleep alone on the sofa.

He sighed, crouching to look at her before glancing at the holodisc and player in his hand.

Did he dare give it to her? Did he dare *not*? How much worse would it be if she discovered he had it later? Turning the disc over, he noted the dark circles under Padmé's eyes had softened further, but she was still too pale; too thin.

Giving her the disc was a calculated risk.

Not unlike, he reflected darkly, *flying that damaged capital star ship into the main droid control ship in that blockade around Ryloth.*

As much as he knew the idea would work, and had worked, the backlash was unknown. In that circumstance, he'd been in an escape pod with Artoo before the ship had exploded; here

he had no such safety net. Regardless of the risk to himself, though, as in the situation with the Droid blockade of Ryloth, the gains far outweighed the risks.

If Padmé reacted the way he suspected he would, this little gem of a holo would open up lines of communication between them again — and not *just* for the snappy arguments she seemed to be trying to pick. Snappy arguments that seemed to be a way to remind herself that accepting his embrace wasn't something she should.

The very thought that she might act more like the woman he'd married, the woman he'd loved, cinched it; she needed to see the holo sooner rather than later.

Vader placed the holo recorder on the table for her to find when she woke and turned to hit the 'fresher for a shower and a change of clothes. He'd barely crossed the threshold when his comlink sounded and he quickly slapped one hand over it, glancing back towards Padmé as he hoped it hadn't woken her. Seeing no response from the lounge area, he flicked it on. "Vader."

"My apologies, Lord Vader," the General's tone was harried as Vader dialled down the volume, *"I know you asked not to be disturbed, but the representative from the Hutts has made contact. They've requested a holo conference immediately to discuss arrangements for renegotiation of the current treaty to be held tomorrow morning."*

Throwing a look over his shoulder, Vader frowned at the sofa where Padmé lay, knowing there was no way out of this; he couldn't pass off this responsibility and would have to deal with it personally. He'd been expecting it; just not today.

It figured

He should have expected something like this after finding that holo. Much as he wanted to, he couldn't stay; as Padmé had pointed out earlier, his Empire needed him. Reluctantly, he headed for the door, leaving his wife on the sofa behind him with one last look.

"I'll be right there, General."

Evening

Padmé woke with a start.

"Oh! I *am* sorry, Mistress Padmé," Threepio apologized immediately, bending to collect the item he'd knocked off the table; the sound that had woken her. "I was trying not to wake you."

"It's okay, Threepio," she assured him, glancing about the room with a frown, the scent of something delicious making her mouth water and her stomach growl. "Are you cooking again?"

"You missed lunch again, my Lady," he scolded, his tone disapproving. "I had thought to tempt you with one of your favorite dishes for dinner."

"It smells delicious, Threepio and I *am* hungry."

"You are? Excellent! Would you like me to bring you a plate?"

“That’s okay,” she assured him, pushing to her feet with a weary motion. She sighed, feeling the weight of her grief pressing down on her once again; a despair that hadn’t ebbed or faded despite how much she’d been reluctantly leaning on Anakin. “I’ll join you in the kitchen.”

“Very well; I will get your supper ready, my Lady.”

Padmé rubbed one hand across her eyes, trying to rid herself of the lethargic feeling that always accompanied waking; the need to return to slumber and the dread of sleeping only to wake in a nightmare. Nightmares, she reflected with a heavy heart, that were occurring with more intensity and frequency. Her throat closed and she sank back to the couch, dropping her face into her hands.

She didn’t know how much more of this she could stand; how much longer would it take before she entered a catatonic state and didn’t come out? How much longer until there was *no* hope of finding Luke and Leia?

“My Lady?”

“Coming Threepio.”

Taking a deep breath, she rubbed her hands over her face, straightened her hair by combing her fingers through it and headed for the kitchenette.

The droid was waiting with a steaming plate of something she couldn’t identify, though it smelled familiar. She sniffed and it took her a moment to identify it. “Shaak steaks?”

“A special order,” Threepio informed her proudly, slipping a plate onto the table. “Lord Vader has given me leave to order anything I wish for your meals. He is *most* concerned that you are not eating and has specifically requested I tempt you with every treat and favorite food in my memory banks.”

Padmé smiled faintly, her stomach churning. She didn’t like the idea of Vader being *nice* despite the fact she’d finally, reluctantly, given up on trying to cope with her nightmares by herself. Just because she turned to him for comfort, didn’t mean she had to like it.

“Is it not to your liking,” Threepio queried worriedly, “I seem to recall you—”

“It’s fine, Threepio,” she couldn’t deal with the droid right now. “Go do a charge cycle; I need some time to myself, okay?”

“I am under orders—”

“Mine,” she cut in sharply, “should be the only ones that matter; we’ve been over this, Threepio. Vader is *not* Anakin no matter how much he looks like him.”

“I am only trying to help, Mistress,” Threepio informed her stiffly, shuffling away. “Lord Vader is correct; you are under nourished and it has ever been my responsibility to ensure—”

She blocking him out, turning her attention to the steak. With her stomach in knots at the mention of Vader, her confusion and uncertainty as to him and his actions drove away her appetite. With a sigh, she collected the plate and returned to the lounge, frowning as she rounded the end of the sofa and spied the items Threepio had knocked off the coffee table earlier when he’d been trying not to wake her.

Though what he *had* been trying to do was still a mystery.

Settling the steak on the table, she picked up the disc and player, turning the disc over in her hand as she noted it was unmarked. Frowning, she set the player on the table and slid the disc in before stepping back, wondering why Vader — Anakin? — hadn't just left her a message on a datapad.

The image that sprang to life on the holo screen was totally and completely unexpected; two cherub like faces, small and scrunched in their first hours of life. Staring at the holo, Padmé's eyes widened as she realized she was looking at two infants, twins, lying together in some kind of bassinette.

The pain that gripped her chest was immediate, driving away her ability to breathe and she clutched her chest, a sense of betrayal swelling within her so fiercely she'd have gladly strangled Vader that that moment if he'd been before her. Looking away, she gritted her teeth against the sense of desolation that was never far, the very fabric of her heart feeling as if it were being unraveled thread by thread.

How could he be so cruel? How could he even think I'd want to see someone else's... someone's...

One hand covered her mouth as she fought sudden tears, struggling to hold in a sob. These children were someone else's babies and he'd... he'd sadistically left it here for her to see. Left it for her to find; to remind her of what she'd lost!

She felt the urge to be sick before the rational part of her brain, the part that had been listening and watching to Vader's actions and words over these last weeks when it came to her, her nightmares and the twins. It counselled caution, a second look at the holo before she jumped to conclusions.

Vader wouldn't have been so solicitous and then so cruel after he'd sworn to find them, would he?

As much as Padmé didn't want to look back, she couldn't help herself. Something within her was telling her she needed to and, with tear glazed eyes, she did, watching as the holo shifted, zooming in on the twins, bringing their features into sharp and distinct focus.

And her breath caught in her throat for a completely different reason, her knees wobbling as her legs gave out and she sank to the ground, staring with wide eyes at the holo before her.

The baby had Skywalker eyes; *Anakin's* eyes.

Luke.

The knowledge hit her with the force of a speeding swoop bike.

She was staring at *Luke*; her baby, her son!

A half sob caught in her throat, partially a laugh she didn't feel, but the wonder of that moment was too much. Tears streaked her cheeks unbidden and unnoticed as she eased forward, the holo changing back to that of the two infants in the bassinette, holding hands and she laugh-sobbed again, reaching out this time to touch the holo.

It became fuzzy as her hand passed through and this time her sob wasn't accompanied by a laugh.

Her babies; her *children*. Luke and Leia, together in the image before her, just hours after they'd been pushed from the sanctuary of her body; just hours after she'd slipped into a coma and left them to the mercies of Bail and Mon. Left them to be stolen, unknowingly submitting them to the mercies of people she'd once believed to be trustworthy; lost in the galactic tapestry of life that often seemed boundless.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to their images, more tears sliding down her cheeks, her arms empty and aching as she wished the images were real, wished she'd held them even once but this... this was precious. This was unthinkable *kind* of the man who'd once been her husband.

A totally un-Vader-like act that had come from nowhere to blindside her.

This was an *Anakin* gesture; something he would have done to make her feel better, to give her hope. It was totally unexpected from the man he'd become and disarmed her completely. It made her yearn for his company, to have him share this with her. *Honestly* share it; as parents who missed their children.

Padmé didn't know how long she sat there, her food forgotten and cold, while staring at the holo, tears sliding down her cheeks. She didn't feel the way her legs ached from being in one position for too long, or the way her muscles threatened to cramp. She didn't notice the way her hands were clenched in the carpet fibers to keep from reaching for the holo.

A holo, she'd realized quickly, that went from the dual shot of the twins to a portrait of Luke, back to the dual shot, and then a portrait of Leia. It cycled continuously and she couldn't take her gaze away from it.

It wasn't until she felt a shift in the presence of the room that she became aware of her surroundings; aware of *his* return. She could *feel* his gaze even as she became aware of the fact he was slowly advancing towards her.

"I don't remember... I've never seen them before." There was a heavy silence that followed her soft, husky statement, but Padmé didn't notice it, wasn't aware that her words affected him in any way. She was too focused on what she was feeling, what she was seeing and couldn't tear her eyes away. "I never... I never knew just how *beautiful* they were."

"Are," he told her just as softly, coming to join her. Vader crouched next to her, gently tilting her head so she would look at him, breaking her visual contact with the holo. "They *are* beautiful; just like their mother. Leia's going to look just like you one day."

She laughed, a sad, watery sound. "Luke's going to look like you," her hand reached up hesitantly to gently touch his cheek, just under his eyes. "He's got your eyes."

"And your lips; the girls won't have a chance." They shared a look and his dropped deliberately to her semi-seated-sprawled position. "That doesn't look very comfortable, Padmé."

She hadn't noticed.

Vader shook his head as he got the gist of her blank stare and slid his arms about her. Shifting her position and settling onto the floor with her, his back to the couch, as he drew her

against his chest. Padmé didn't object, going willingly, as she adjusted her position to be sitting sideways across his lap, her head on his shoulder as she turned her gaze back to the holo. Vader's arms remained about her, one loosely about her waist, one hand gently stroking her hair and toying with the ends.

"Better?"

She didn't say anything, didn't mention it or fight it, but her head shifted and her forehead touched the side of his neck; the line of his jaw. "Leia's got my mother's cheekbones."

"And my mother's chin," he agreed softly. "She really will look just like you, you know."

"Not quite," the admission was pained. "But Luke doesn't really take after me at all."

"He has your eyebrows."

"My eyebrows?"

Vader nodded, his cheek rubbing over the top of her head. "They're very good eyebrows."

"Do you think they're blonde, like yours were when you were on Tatooine?"

He squeezed her tightly, letting her know she wasn't alone, and Padmé sank ever deeper into his embrace. *This* was the man she'd missed; the man without pretence. The man who'd loved and supported her; the man who'd held her when she'd cried, or made time to celebrate when she'd succeeded.

This was her Anakin.

"I don't know. He might take after you and be a brunette. Leia might be blonde."

"Or they might both have black hair," Padmé closed her eyes and his lips touched her skin, reassuring and supportive; empathetic. He was suffering as much as she was, only he hid it better. "I miss them, Ani."

"I do too." He hesitated again. "Did I do the right thing here, Padmé?"

"The holo?"

He nodded, seemingly uncertain.

Her arms slipped around his waist and she squeezed him tightly, her throat closing. "You have no idea what this means to me, Anakin. This... this makes it all real."

"I wasn't sure if you wanted it," he admitted. "Or if it would make things harder for you."

"Never," she denied fiercely.

He drew back so he could look down into her face, his blue eyes stormy and pained. "I've seen what's happening to you, Padmé. I saw how hard their lifeday was and then the incident the other day with the Lieutenant Colonel and the nightmares..." he shook his head, lifting the hand at her waist to cup her cheek. "I couldn't stand seeing you so sad; so hurt. When I found this... I knew you had to have it."

"Thank you, Ani; thank you... so much." Tears slid down her cheeks despite her fervent words. "I just wish... I wish they were here so I could hold them."

Vader pulled her back into his arms, wrapping them both about her as he tucked her head under his chin and gently rocked her, feeling the same. “So do I, my love.” Padmé clung to him, burrowing closer, taking heart in his rough admission. ‘I wish they were here,’ he continued softly, letting her cry, “so I could see them in your arms.”

“If only we knew where they were,” she whispered brokenly, her grip on him tightening, never taking her gaze from the holo. “If we knew, I could... we could...”

Vader stilled, rubbing one hand down her back before easing away from her again so their eyes could lock. His were still stormy, intent, and he adjusted his grip on her again, keeping one arm behind her back as he gently brushed the tears from her cheeks with his thumb. “I promise you, Padmé,” he swore softly, completely Anakin in those moments to her eyes and ears; an echo of another promise he’d once made her. “I promise I’ll find them so we can be a family; so you can hold them and tell them you love them. I promise I’ll bring them back to you.”

Searching his gaze, she wanted to believe him. Desperately and completely without hesitation — but she knew the odds stacked against them. “Can you?”

“I will do *everything* in my power to make it happen, my love,” he swore, searching her face. His head moved fractionally towards hers and stopped. It was an unconscious echo of their first kiss when he’d been so nervous; as he appeared to be hesitant to her reception of him now. “I *will* bring Luke and Leia home; I promise.”

“Anakin.”

He groaned softly at the plea in her voice and this time his head did dip, giving her ample time to escape if she so chose; but Padmé didn’t want to escape. She sobbed once, softly, and tilted her head to his as his lips settled over hers as her hand slid from his waist, up his chest and curled around the back of his neck. His kiss was sweet, heartfelt; a promise in its own right and an affirmation of the vow he’d just made.

Closing her eyes, Padmé gave herself up to the kiss, tears and hope mingling as she shifted her grip on him, the hand at the back of his neck sliding up to bury itself in the wealth of his hair.

His fingers stroked her face, cupping it, tracing the contours as he adjusted the pressure of his lips, tilting his head to kiss her properly. His lips moved across hers, undemanding, almost in supplication; a kiss she’d not felt in *years*. This wasn’t the demanding insistence of a man who believed her to be his right — this wasn’t Vader kissing her; this was *Anakin*.

Anakin, who held her; touched her.

Anakin, whose hands were sliding along her waist, under the hem of her shirt, his fingertips dipping into her waistband.

Anakin, whose leather glove was rough, yet soft, against her cheek.

Anakin, whose breath mingled with hers, *her* name a prayer on his lips.

The sweetness of the kiss didn’t last, couldn’t, and quickly, ever so quickly, desire stirred between them. His tongue feathered the seam of her lips and she didn’t deny him, kissing him

back just as deeply, just as passionately. It turned ravenous, but not like before; not like it had been the previous two times since their reunion.

This wasn't just lust; wasn't a reclaiming or a source of anger. It wasn't a need that was being fulfilled simply because Padmé needed the outlet of his touch; needed to forget.

This was more; this was a mutual coming together. A celebration; a meeting of equals on equal footing.

It was like... coming *home*.

Unconsciously, she pressed into that touch, needing to feel his skin against her own, *aching* for it, for the affirmation that she wasn't the ghost she saw in the mirror but a living, breathing woman with needs and desires beyond the shadow of what she was becoming. Breaking the kiss, she tilted her forehead to his as she shifted in his lap and made him groan.

"I need you, Anakin," she whispered huskily, tears on her lashes as she pressed her chest against his. "Make love to me."

Again there was a moment's hesitation on his end, his words strained, almost pained. "Are you sure?"

"Remind me what it is to be alive," she told him, brushing her lips across his again. "Remind me what it is to live; make love to me — *with* me. Remind me..."

Vader surged to his feet, Padmé securely in his grasp, and headed for his bedchamber; a bedchamber that was about to become *theirs* again. He brushed a soft kiss across her lips as he crossed the threshold, his blue eyes intense as Padmé looked up into them, trying not to read beyond what she needed to see. She needed this; needed *him*.

"Anakin?"

He said nothing, simply took those last steps to the bed and then laid her down with an achingly tender gesture. Her throat closed as he looked at her for a moment and she stretched her arms out in silent invitation. He groaned softly and followed her down.

...

...

In the aftermath of their lovemaking, Vader held her close with a gentle touch, running his fingers up and down the line of her spine, her tracing gentle circles on his chest. He tilted his head to look at her, still recovering from the most intense, *heartfelt* bout of loving they'd shared yet, bar none.

Bending forward, he pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead before closing his eyes and tilting his head back with a soft sigh. *This* was what he'd been missing; *this* was why he'd searched for her for so long for. She *completed* him.

Padmé had held nothing back, throwing herself into their lovemaking with an abandon and focus he'd never seen before. There had been no tears, no plea; simply a man and his wife coming together in the truest expression of their inner selves. An expression of their sorrows and shared desolation; comforting one another as only two souls as close as theirs could.

It left him feeling surprisingly uneasy; vulnerable.

Padmé soft words feathering across his chest drew him from his thoughts.

“Where did you find it?”

He didn’t even pretend not to follow her thought process, still raw from the experience himself. “Threepio had it in his memory processors.” He smiled faintly, his grip tightening on her fractionally. “It was buried pretty deep; Artoo helped me find it.”

“Artoo.” She curled impossibly closer, tightening her grip on him. ‘Thank you, Ani,’ she whispered even as he felt a warm moisture tickle his chest; her tears dripping to anoint his skin. “Thank you...”

He bent his head to kiss her crown as she drifted off, still in his arms. Turning, he stretched out one hand and called the covers to him, pulling them up as she shivered and sighed softly. Vader adjusted their positions for something more comfortable and conducive to sleeping only to find sleep elusive. His hand continued to stroke her back soothingly, absently, his gaze on her face, his mind on the events that had brought them to this moment.

Bending close, he brushed his lips over hers in the barest whisper of a kiss. “Sleep, my love,” he told her softly. “No nightmares will find you in my arms.”

As if in response, she nuzzled him — and Vader smiled.

Month Twenty Five, Day 13 PEF

Author's Note: I am *back*! No, your eyes don't deceive you, this is an update ;) Crazy, eh?

NaNo has given me much time to think and consider what needed to come next and plan *gasp* a little in advance. I was able, as a result, to get a couple of chapters out of the month. That said, the chapters are always going to be full days, possibly several days where needed, so pay attention to the date tags. And I haven't written far enough ahead [yet] to go back to more than once a month postings, but the monthly postings *will* be happening from this point forward [provided my computer doesn't explode and my files disappear :p]

Massive thank you to everyone who has been encouraging me through the long Hiatus. The contents of the fic, and the heavy subject matter, make it quite draining to write at times [especially having to go back and make sure I'm not contradicting myself!], and so I do apologize for the long delays. Fair warning, from February to April I will be on hiatus due to family matters and there will not be an update for those months, but I should be back to posting in May.

Without further ado, chapter 76!

I hope everyone had a Merry Christmas [if you celebrate] and a very enjoyable holiday if you don't!

Chapter 76

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Five, Day Thirteen PEF

Morning

Warmth and comfort didn't want to loosen their hold as Padmé stirred from the depths of the first truly peaceful and restful slumber she'd had in years. Despite not wanting to loosen its grasp, it was compelled to do so by an insistent and pressure moving along her neck and a heat curling in the pit of her stomach. A faint smile curved her lips as she stretched, shifting, her muscles protesting in a good sort of fashion even as she pressed into the caress.

"Mmm; Anakin," she rolled, still immersed in the first dream that didn't qualify as a nightmare since the twin's capture.

Half asleep, she was secure in the knowledge that if she were to open her eyes in that moment, she would see her husband and they would be in her Senatorial apartments back on Coruscant. That these last two years had been the nightmare and he would reassure her that Luke and Leia were sleeping soundly in the next room.

"Good morning, my love."

His words brushed across her cheek and made her shiver, curling into his touch like a feline being stroked. His hands glided across her skin with a knowing touch.

“Morning,” she murmured, turning her face to his and receiving the expected kiss.

It was gentle, loving; the kind of slow caress that was accompanied by an equally slow rise to want and need — which generally led to other activities. This time was no disappointment. His touch was sure and deliberate, rousing her passions from their slumber to match his, his teeth grazing the curve of her neck as she arched it into his kiss. He woke her thoroughly, drawing her to full consciousness without regrets as she gloried in the absorption of his caresses.

After the intensity of the night before, this morning’s encounter was slow, deliberately so, and he brought her pleasure unreservedly before finding it himself.

Their breathing mingled and mixed for several long, gasping moments before he pulled away, rolling her to her side, their bodies sliding together as he braced himself with his head close to hers, his lips brushing her cheek and nuzzling her hair. “Now it’s a good morning.”

She smiled softly, taking in the sheen of his skin and the way his hair curled with perspiration. Reaching up, she brushed his bangs from his eyes as her smile slowly faded. He was watching her, his azure eyes alit with worry and affection.

His next words surprised her.

“I owe you an apology,” he told her abruptly, his words barely a murmur. “For Mustafar.”

“Mustafar?”

He nodded, nuzzling her cheek. “For using my powers on you; something I swore never to do.” His hand came up to brush her hair from her cheek, his gaze intense and a touch arrogant, but completely *him*. “I never should have assumed you’d brought Obi-Wan to kill me. I should never have hurt you; you’re the mother of our children.”

“No,” she agreed, pulling back some as reality began to assert itself and she searched his face for his sincerity; the apology was unexpected. “You shouldn’t have.”

Vader didn’t let her escape, leaning in to touch foreheads, his gaze open to hers. “I may regret my actions, Padmé, but I can’t change them. Nor would I — they did eventually lead you back to me.”

Unable to deny or refute the statement, she simply stared at him.

With a sigh, he bent to kiss her again before reluctantly pulling away and sliding to the edge of the bed. In the wake of that apology she’d expected... more. Her hand trailed along his shoulder and she frowned, pushing herself up on her elbow. “Where are you going?”

“To shower,” he cast a challenging look her way. “Care to join me?”

Padmé declined, choosing instead to lounge in bed and consider everything that had occurred in the last forty eight hours. And Va— *Anakin*’s return to her. A small voice in the back of her mind preached caution, but Padmé was too exhausted to heed it.

Mentally she couldn't fight it anymore; *Anakin* had allowed one of his officers a chance to be there when his child was being born. *Anakin* had gone to great lengths to find her a holo of their children. *Anakin* had made love to her twice in the last twelve hours and it had been like before between them — but more.

His thoughtful gesture the day before had done much to mitigate and diffuse her anger, leaving behind confusion and doubt. Both of which had been swept to the back of her mind during the hours she'd spent in his bed and in his arms.

Here, in his — *their* — room, she could take what she needed to bolster her flagging spirits, boost her confidence and determination; she could *share* in the loss of their children and ease that pain in the shared passions that had created them.

In what had to be a record breaking time, Vader appeared in the doorway, towel about his hips, his hair gleaming, and without thinking she eased forward in the bed, towards him, watching as a stray droplet dripped from the strands to land on his shoulder and then slowly, ever so slowly, slide downwards towards the folded fabric about his waist.

"Keep looking at me like that, Padmé, and we'll not be leaving this room today."

Her gaze darted back to his and, unbidden, an admission slipped through. "I don't want to leave."

Vader groaned. "Padmé..."

"There's hurt out there, Anakin," she confessed, her voice raw. "Hurt and agony; despair." What she didn't say was that beyond the door to the chamber, there was reality. Their children were missing and might never be found. Cocooned in his bed, with the animosity between them tempered and gone, she could pretend that Luke and Leia were asleep in the next room and that Anakin had never chosen power over love.

She could pretend that nothing had ever shattered her world.

Striding to the bed, he bent and slipped his arms back around her, hugging her tight. "Use me," he told her roughly, "use me as your shield, your bulwark. I won't let anything hurt you ever again, Padmé."

Clinging to him, she willed the voice in the back of her mind to be silent. She *needed* this and could no longer deny it.

The embrace was over far too quickly for her tastes as he pulled away, cupped her face and gently stroked his thumb across the curve of her prominent cheekbone. He sighed. "I wish I could stay with you today."

"What do you mean?"

He stepped back after one last caress. "I have a meeting this morning," his revelation was reluctant as he turned and began to collect clean clothes for the day, tossing them to land on the edge of the bed; shirt, tunic and slacks.

"Anakin—"

He groaned at her tone and slanted a pained look at her. "I can't delay this Padmé. It's part of a very delicate negotiation."

“What negotiation?”

“It’s a renegotiation, actually,” He paused while pulling his shirt over his head, but resumed speaking as he pulled his head clear, “of the trade line dispute in Hutt Space.”

Grasping onto the change of topic, one she happened to be exceedingly good with, was a relief. It helped push the shadows in her mind back and reassert the fantasy that they were simply Husband and Wife again; Anakin and Padmé getting ready to take on the galaxy. To have him the one about to embark on a diplomatic mission was a bit of a novelty.

She pushed herself up further into a sitting position, the blanket tucked demurely about her chest, frowning. It was more of an unconscious pout; one she didn’t realize she was making. “Anakin, I don’t—”

He smiled, cutting her off with a look as he stopped with just his shirt on. “Keep looking at me like that and I’m going to botch this whole deal.”

“Is that all it takes,” she teased, not wanting him to go; wanting him to make love to her again, “maybe I should—”

“Padmé,” he practically groaned her name as she taunted him with a mock drop of the sheet, settling the issue by turning his back as he slid on his trousers.

Enjoying the view while she had it, Padmé reluctantly brought the topic back to the reason for his departure. “What are you renegotiating?”

“The terms of the treaty,” he was doing up his belt, deliberately not looking at her. “Ship and troop movements through Hutt space were enough before but there have been a few developments since then and the Hutts have refused to come to the table before now.”

Sliding towards the edge of the bed, Padmé frowned, using the sheet as a cover as she tucked her legs over the side but didn’t climb down. He was pulling on his tunic and doing up the latches with efficient movements. “What does Toydaria have to do with it?”

“Toydaria?”

“The planet below us, Anakin.”

Looking up then, Padmé was gratified to see she’d caught his attention as he smiled faintly.

“It is a part of it,” he offered finally, stepping back towards her. Placing his hands on either side of her hips over the sheet, he leaned down and nuzzled her cheek, brushing his lips over it. “Honestly, I’d rather stay here with you. I don’t like leaving you alone.”

Lifting her hands, the sheet dropping to her waist, she cupped his face as he groaned. “Then stay.”

“I want to,” his voice was rough, “but if I back away from the negotiation when we’ve been pushing for contact for so long, the Hutts will nullify the treaty.”

“Then take me with you,” she offered spontaneously, not really thinking about what she was offering, simply that she didn’t want him to go; didn’t want to be alone again. “I could help you negotiate like I did the last time.”

“And you were crucial, instrumental even,” lifting his hands, he skimmed them up the side of her body, tilting his head to kiss her. Padmé leaned into the dual assault, but it was over far too quickly. “But I can’t risk you like that.”

“Anakin—”

“The Galaxy thinks you’re dead, Padmé,” his voice was rough with remembered grief. ‘I failed to protect you last time. I won’t jeopardize you like that again.’ Gripping her wrists, he gently pulled her hands from his face. His azure eyes gleamed as he took her in and then shook his head as if to clear it. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Ani—”

“I can’t bring you with me on this one, Padmé,” he reiterated. ‘Threepio and Artoo will be around to keep you company while I can’t.’ Dipping his head, he kissed her again, quickly, before straightening and taking deliberate steps away, heading for the door. He was tugging on and closing his glove over his prosthetic as he moved. “Promise me you’ll try and eat something.”

“I’ll try,” she agreed, feeling the weight of his departure like a cloak settling about her shoulders. Pushing herself from the bed as he disappeared, Padmé made her way towards the ‘fresher, trying to hold onto the distraction, the *strength* he had offered.

Eat first, she told herself sternly. Even as the thought struck, her stomach growled loudly and cramped. Not because he’d asked, or because she’d promised, but, she realized, because she was *hungry*. It was a novel concept to actually *want* to eat after having to be forced to do so for so long.

When had she last, truly, been hungry?

Determination squared her shoulders. She might not be able to help look for her children, but she was damn well going to be around when they were found!

Mid Morning

“Unacceptable,” Vader told the holograms of the Hutt council with a foreboding expression, his words cracking like a whip. ‘The representative docks before mid-day *today* or the Empire will consider Toydaria as annexed territory.’ His statement drew immediate outrage and uproar, but he wasn’t finished. “For every hour the representative fails to arrive, a surrounding star cluster will be added to the list of annexed territories.”

One of the Hutts made a protest, denouncing the claim.

“I have had enough of the tactics and schemes of the Hutt Council. The representative arrives *today* to discuss terms or the rule of the Hutt clans will cease,” he didn’t snarl the words, but there was no mistaking the way his eyes flashed or the unholy pleasure in the smile crossing his lips, “and *I* will see to it *personally*.”

With a slashing motion of his hand, Vader cut off the communication array, practically vibrating with suppressed energy. Hutts always got his back up. Slavers were bad enough, but it was a Hutt that had bought his mother before she’d been lost in that pod race to Watto and

he'd have liked nothing better than to have paid them all back for that indignity. Having to work with them was, and had always been, a sore point; privately he *hoped* the dignitary didn't show.

Hutt lords or not, they and their armies would be no match for the wrath of Darth Vader.

"My lord?"

"Yes General?"

"A brief message my lord," there was amusement in the General's tone; he'd heard the whole thing. "The Hutt lords have advised that the envoy is less than fifty minutes out and would like us to communicate an approach vector and docking instructions."

"Do it," Vader instructed, turning to look out the viewport as he tapped the fingers of his real hand against the fabric of the metal one behind his back. "Greet them when they arrive, General—"

"Yes, sir."

"— and escort them to the brig."

"The brig, sir?"

Vader's fingers stopped moving and he heard the General audibly swallow.

"Understood sir."

Staying where he was, Vader heard the General leave the bridge. The normal operating sounds resumed, muted and muffled, as they always did in his presence. Fear kept them in line and fear would keep them loyal. He smiled a cold, cruel smile, looking beyond his reflection to the ship that was approaching the *Exactor* and its unsuspecting cargo.

The Hutts would listen to what he had to say and cooperate, or his threat would become a very real consequence.

"No more!"

Threepio and Artoo's delight at her renewed appetite spurred her spirits to something resembling amusement as Padmé held her hands up in supplication. They'd been plying her with bits of various foods since she'd been left to her own devices and, after such a feast post fast, she was afraid to make herself sick.

"I'm full, Threepio, I promise."

"But Mistress Padmé, you have been ever so reluctant to eat. I cannot help but be glad you have found a desire to consume sustenance once more."

So was she, but she could already feel the oppressive weight of the twin's absence pressing in on her again. Using the last smile that Anakin had flashed her way before leaving as a talisman to ward off the depression, she forced herself to focus on the moment. "For a protocol droid, you're pretty good as a chef."

Threepio completely missed her teasing and if he could have beamed, he no doubt would have. "It is my honor to cook for you when you so desire it."

"You can make dinner for us later, Threepio," she promised as she pushed away from the table, leaving her dishes for the droid. "We're supposed to have dinner together tonight."

"Oh! How wonderful!"

Artoo added an excited toodle to Threepio's delighted exclamation as Padmé headed for the 'fresher, already thinking ahead to how she might fill the rest of her morning. A shower was in order and then, possibly, the gym. The backwardness of the arrangement suited her just fine as she tossed one last remark over her shoulder. "Just make something we both like, okay?"

"Of course, Mistress Padmé! I shall begin searching the databanks and the stores on board at once for something suitable to the occasion."

While letting the Hutt stew in its cell, Vader watched it on the monitor with a nearly impassive expression, alone in the detention center's control room. The Hutt slithered back and forth on its grotesque body, seeming to test the length and breadth of the small room, undoubtedly searching for a weakness. Vader knew it would find none. The cell had been designed to hold Jedi and a blob of fat like the one before him would be no match for its deterrents.

One eye on the screen, he keyed in the code for his suite, waiting as the other side to pick up, wondering if Padmé would—

"Lord Vader's chambers."

"Threepio." It figured. He hadn't exactly told him *not* to answer the comm. "Where's Padmé?"

"Conducting her morning ablutions, sir. Shall I see if she is finished?"

"No." It took a moment for Vader to realize what Threepio meant as he regarded the grotesque alien in his cell block, about as antithesis as one could get from his beautiful wife. "Has she been in the shower long?"

"About five minutes, sir. If I may say so, whatever you said or did this past evening, a job well done!"

"What are you talking about, Threepio?"

"Why, Mistress Padmé, of course. She may not be in the best of health, but her appetite was most robust compared to its decided lack these past months."

"Excellent." It was the best news Threepio could have given him. "See that she remains active today, Threepio. I intend to ensure she's just as ravenous tonight."

"Very good, sir. Will that be all?"

Vader glanced at the image of the Hutt before him. "I may be later than planned if this situation doesn't develop the way I wish it to."

"Very good, sir."

The comm. clicked off and Vader turned his full attention back to the Hutt, settling himself to wait patiently. His wife might have been a diplomat, but he'd learned a thing or two. Hutts could be patient, but this one visibly wasn't. Vader was looking forward to the upcoming encounter — on his terms. And if it went sour, the blob of corrupt deception currently slithering across his holding cell would only have itself to blame.

An almost feral smile crossed Vader's lips. Let the games begin.

Two Hours Later

Gesticulating wildly with its short stubby arms as it slobbered and mutely threatened from behind the walls of its transparent cell, the Hutt envoy was near foaming at the mouth.

Vader was less than impressed but hardly surprised. Hutts thought of themselves as superior to all other races in the galaxy, something he'd learned young and learned well. His knowledge of the creatures would serve him well, but it was his desire that he could have included Padmé in these negotiations; he knew Hutts from experience, she knew their politics.

If the risk hadn't been her life, he very well might have if for no other reason than to give her a sense of purpose.

Of course, without her, he wasn't restrained by the image of him her expectations seemed to be forming. He was still hopeful she'd come to accept, with time, everything he'd done for her, but these long weeks together had taught him caution. Padmé would require careful handling to ensure she didn't see more than he knew her capable of accepting.

Like this.

Alone, but for the Stormtroopers down the hall and the security monitors in every cell, Vader stepped up to the door. He didn't take his eyes off the Hutt as he lifted one hand and depressed the access panel, opening it and waited. He wasn't disappointed.

The Hutt's tail arced in at where he would have been standing if he'd stepped immediately inside. Thrashing, the appendage spun the huge mass of fat around. Not so massive it needed, or could afford, a hover sled like Jabba to be comfortable, but massive enough. On a lesser being that tail slap, had it connected, would have hurt.

"Do it again, Yersub," Vader told him evenly, his voice cold and deliberate, "and I'll take it off."

There was a protest, in Huttese, a denouncement of its current treatment and a threat that the ruling Hutt clan would hear of his treachery.

With a harsh laugh, Vader shook his head. "No. I don't think they will." Stepping into the cell, he approached the Hutt, conscious of the lashing tail and ready to pull his lightsaber if it

proved necessary to make good on his promise. Part of him hoped he'd have to. He *hated* Hutts, almost more than he hated Sandpeople. "If you were to present the little debacle of your current circumstances, you'd lose face. You'd lose the favor you're trying to curry and the prestige you hoped to gain by this trip. You'd be a laughing stock, your family not fit to sit among the ruling Hutts for generations to come."

There was silence for a heartbeat, confirming his statements, and Vader held up his hands when the Hutt belatedly began to protest. "Spare me your empty posturing, Yersub. The only reason you still live is because I currently have need of you." Vader's eyes narrowed, his lips twisting in a cruel smile. "Test me and that can change."

Yersub, surprisingly, fell silent.

Part of Vader wished he hadn't. Given the chance, he'd have enjoyed sending the Hutt ruling council a very personal message about obedience. "Toydaria will be returned to the Hutts as it is now. Subjugated and capable of providing the slaves needed for the market. In return, the Hutts will grant all traffic providing unique Imperial codes complete immunity from all Hutt interdiction and the authority to act with impunity on any identified Rebel or Jedi cells." He ignored the Hutt's incredulous outburst, finishing his terms in the same even tone. "Individual or otherwise, all traitors are to be handed over to the Empire immediately."

The Hutt protested again, and Vader listened stonily, his expression deliberately impassive.

"Failure to comply with these terms will result in an Imperial investigation and denouncing of the Hutts as harboring enemies of the Empire.

Another protest followed, along with an accusation of war.

"War implies equal strength by both parties. Toydaria was strictly an occupation exercise with minimal resistance. A lesson in punishment."

An inquiry.

"For everyone. Cross the Empire, cross *me*, and you will find what it is to be occupied and crushed without mercy."

The Hutt was silent for a long moment before trying another tactic and Vader's expression didn't change. He'd said his piece and now he knew the Hutt would try and do what they always did. They would try and bargain for the upper hand.

Vader would wait him out. Imperial might would not be trifled with. Once the Hutts accepted the fact they were no longer the most feared armada, the most feared *organization*, in the galaxy, things would run smoothly. Of course, Vader wasn't expecting them to accept it gracefully.

He was not disappointed.

Late Evening

Locking the door with barely a look at the troopers stationed beyond it, Vader returned to his quarters to find the lights low, Threepio and Artoo in the middle of a recharge cycle,

dinner waiting in the cooler and his wife nowhere to be seen. It was still relatively early, though later than he'd hoped to be, and he'd reluctantly had to call and postpone dinner plans. Padmé had been surprisingly understanding, sympathetic even, that negotiations hadn't been going in his favor.

He couldn't talk about the negotiations in detail — she'd have been appalled at his intimidation and torture tactics — but what he was trying to accomplish was similar to the treaties she'd once brokered. It had given them common ground, in a sense, and he'd been careful to only reveal what she would approve of. He was trying to avoid a war, except in this case, Imperial might far outmatched that of the Hutts in the organized sense. His negotiation approach was more of an ultimatum, but it got the job done in the end.

The Hutt still hadn't complied, but Yersub had agreed to contacts the Hutt ruling council to discuss the terms the Imperials had put forth.

It was only a matter of time.

Shrugging off the thoughts, Vader checked his suite. Padmé wasn't in the kitchenette, nor on the couch or in the living area where she'd spent the better part of the last two months. He checked his office, finding it locked and then frowned, not hearing the 'fresher, his gaze trailing to the door. The trooper detail was still at attention, which meant she wasn't out.

"Padmé?"

There was no answer in the stillness and his gaze fell on the closed door to his bedchamber. She wouldn't be... would she? The night before had begun a promising faze of their relationship, putting them back on the track he'd desired from the first. Padmé back in his arms willingly and, who knew, all because of a holo.

Approaching the door, he eased it open and stopped.

Padmé was sprawled on the bed, her eyes closed, her breathing deep and even, surrounded by a cloud of chestnut hair. His throat closed at the angelic image. Her body covered in a plain white sheet, her bare shoulders glimmering like alabaster in the low light. From what he could see, with one hand curled near her cheek, she looked much like she had other nights when he'd arrived late. The setting might have been different, but it was intimately familiar.

Despite her visibly diminished form and the shadows still under her eyes, there was no doubting the almost ethereal look to her.

Beautiful.

He hated to disturb her when she looked so peaceful and eased the door mostly closed. Stepping back from it, a smile tugged at his lips. Was that all it had taken to banish her nightmares — a holo of their children and a night of intensely personal, delicately passionate intimacy?

With a shake of his head, marveling at what he considered a minor gift — the more she slept, the quicker her strength would recover — he turned away. Striding back to the kitchenette, he retrieved his meal and set about heating it. He was just pulled it away from the cooker when a glimmer of warning struck him and he frowned, turning.

"Padmé?"

There was no sound in the suite as he stepped from the kitchenette, one hand on the door frame as he listened intently. The soft whir of electrical appliances, the slight hum of the droids in their power down and recharge cycles and the recyclers for the air broke the stillness. All of which suddenly seemed abnormally loud.

Vader frowned, his hand drifting to his lightsaber. “Padmé?” A glance at the droids showed they were still powered down and Vader moved towards the bedroom, listening, as he stretched out with the Force.

The wall of utter desolation that struck him, staggered him. *Padmé!* Sprinting to the bedroom, he threw the door open and was beside her in seconds. Tears streamed down her cheeks, Luke and Leia’s names echoing in the room as he went for the bed, noticing only as he slid into it that her eyes were still closed.

“Padmé!”

She began to thrash, demanding he let her go, pleading she be allowed to see their children.

“Padmé. Wake up.” The nightmare which held her in its thrall continued as he shook her first, trying to jar her from sleep, “You’re dreaming — wake up!”

“No!” Her cry was desperate, rising to a shriek of denial as she struggled against his hold. “Not my *babies!*”

“*Padmé!*” Vader wrapped his arms around her tightly in an effort to prevent her struggles, driving her down and to the mattress when she would have surged beyond him. She wriggled in his hold, twisting in the covers, straining against his strength when, as quickly as it had started, the fighting spirit left her. Sagging, she seemed to collapse inwards, sinking beneath him, and Vader was quick to take his weight on his arms. Leveraging himself upwards, he looked down into her tear streaked face with concern.

Her eyes were open, her head turned to the side as she stared blankly, silent tears still leaking down her cheeks.

“Padmé.” He whispered her name this time, lifting one hand to caress her cheek and wiping away her tears. When she made no move to look at him, he grasped her chin and made her. The look in her eyes made him groan softly, feeling an echo of her agony as if it were his own, and he bent to kiss her without thinking.

She returned the kiss mechanically at first, for several heartbeats, before she seemed to come to her senses. Her kiss turned hungry. Desperate. Seeming to be torn from the bottom of her soul as she suddenly sucked his tongue into her mouth with an unexpected pressure. Surprised into submission, Vader wasn’t ready for her to roll him as she practically threw herself against his chest. They spun, Padmé coming out on top, as she pinned him bodily to the bed.

Desperation echoed through her movements, their kiss almost frantic. Her hands worked furiously, sliding between them to his belt and within moments she had it undone and was freeing him from his trousers.

It never crossed his mind to object as she catapulted them into a furious and ferocious bout of lovemaking. They careened to the end in an embarrassingly explosive short amount of

time, Padmé coming apart in his arms with a cry unlike any he'd before heard.

Sweat matted their skin, his shirt and pants clinging uncomfortably to his, as their harsh breathing echoed in the stillness of the room. Vader stared up at Padmé as he attempted to get his breath back. *Sweet Force!* Even as he watched, Padmé curled over, her forehead touching his collarbone as her body trembled under his hands. Bending his head, he pressed his lips to the crown of her head. She didn't respond and he rolled, putting her beneath him once more, their bodies still intimately joined.

"Padmé?"

"I'm alright now," she told him softly, her eyes no longer the vivid pools of desperation he'd glimpsed at the start of their unexpected tryst.

Vader nuzzled her cheek. "I'm glad I could help."

The smile she gave him was weak, but genuine. "You've always been able to make me forget myself."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Sometimes." Her eyes were serious. "But not now."

Pulling back, he searched her gaze before bending down to kiss her again. She tilted her face to his, kissing him back, one hand coming up to curl around the back of his neck and into his hair. He shivered at the touch, enjoying the feel of her nails on his skin before reluctantly pulling away enough to murmur. "I should undress."

"Now?"

His lips curved into a small smile. "I know it's belated, but you didn't exactly give me the chance to before." As he watched, her cheeks turned a delightful pink color, as he'd hoped, and he dropped a kiss on the left one, touching it with the tip of his tongue. "I promise to come right back."

In response, her thighs tightened around his hips. "You've the Force, make use of it."

He blinked, staring at her incredulously. "What?"

"Use the Force," she bent towards him, putting her lips to his ear, "take off your clothes."

It wasn't how Vader expected to spend the night, but who was he to deny her request? Vader planted one hand on the back of her neck, drawing her lips to his, and gave himself over to her demands.

Forgotten and unlamented, his dinner wasn't rescued until Threepio came out of his charge cycle several hours later. Shaking his head and marveling at his master's propensity to forget the simplest of things, he disposed of it once finding that both his Master and Mistress appeared to be sleeping peacefully together and none the wiser as to why.

Month Twenty Five, Day 14 PEF

Chapter 78

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Five, Day Fourteen PEF

Morning

Vader woke to find his arms, and his bed, empty. Blinking, he yawned and stretched, scratching his head as he looked around perplexed, a nagging ache in his gut telling him he'd not eaten in some time. Still, the ache in his gut had nothing to do with the confusion that had struck him. Hadn't Padmé been in bed with him?

"Padmé?"

She didn't answer and he was reminded of the previous night. Not of coming in to find her in the throes of a nightmare, but of arriving back in the suite after interrogating the Hutt.

"Padmé?" he raised his voice.

"Here." Her faint reply reached him and Vader threw back the covers.

"Where are you?" he didn't wait for a reply as he stepped naked into the doorway, frowning. He found her turning to face him, her eyes widening and then a smile curving her lips. "There you are."

"Where else would I be, Anakin?" Her gaze dropped and then quickly shifted back to his face. "It's not like I'm free to leave."

"You're not a prisoner here, Padmé," without looking, he stretched out his hand and called his robe to him. Shrugging into it, he belted it loosely before approaching her. "I wish you wouldn't think of yourself as one."

"It's hard not to with the guards at the door." She sighed as he neared where she was standing at the viewport, turning back to the view.

Unable to resist, he slid his hand along the base of her spine as he drew near, drawing her close against his side as he did so. "If I knew you were completely safe without them, I'd dismiss them in a heartbeat." She was silent and Vader frowned, looking down at her. "You didn't think they were there to keep you *in*, did you?"

"A month ago they were."

"A month ago you kept trying to leave," he countered, brushing his lips against her temple. "A month ago you weren't willing to let me help you."

“A month ago I didn’t want your help,” she agreed softly, almost sadly. “What happened to us, Anakin? How did we ever get from where we started to now?”

He didn’t have an answer for her and rewrapped his arms around her back. Holding her, he tucked her head under his chin and stared sightlessly at the viewport. Vader had some ideas as to what had happened to *her*, but she knew very well what had happened to him even if she wouldn’t acknowledge it. Bringing it up wouldn’t help him, though, so he held his peace. Padmé wanted to spend her time with Anakin so Anakin he’d be. To a degree. If it kept her in his arms and sharing his bed, he had no intention of breaking the status quo.

“You’re up early.” He murmured the observation, ducking his head to brush his lips against her temple. “Trouble sleeping again?”

“Some,” she conceded before lifting her chin and looking at him. “Not as much as before, though.”

“Sleeping with me is helping then, is it?” Vader couldn’t resist the tease, a smirk crossing his lips, meaning it in every connotation that it could be taken in.

Padmé, his brilliant wife, had no trouble following his line of thought and, where she might once have blushed, this time she answered him with a grin of her own, a sparkle in her eyes he’d not seen in some time. “Hmm, possibly. Everything’s a bit of a blur. Exhaustion will do that to me.”

“I, milady, will take that,” he ducked his head to kiss her gently, speaking against her lips “as a compliment.”

Her grip on him tightened as she returned his kiss, pressing herself against him, only to pull back after several moments. When their lips broke, her expression was again solemn, almost sad.

“What is it?”

“Are you negotiating again today, Anakin?”

“I have to finalize the deal that was proposed, why?”

“Can I come with you today?”

“I can’t chance it, Padmé. We went over this yesterday — it’s too dangerous.”

“You’d be with me, I couldn’t be safer.”

“I can’t take that risk. The entirety of the Galactic population believes you’re dead, save for a select few. I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Anakin...” she sounded exasperated. “You can’t hide me away forever.”

“Watch me.” He bent to hold her again and found her resisting and rigid in his arms. “What?”

“You don’t mean that, do you?”

Realizing his error, he flashed her a half smile. “It was a joke, Padmé. I was teasing you.” She didn’t look convinced and he ran his fingers gently through her hair. “A time will come,

my love, where you will need to be acknowledged officially as my wife again. When that day comes, I want your survival to be a surprise.”

“Why?”

“Call me selfish,” he tilted his forehead to hers, ‘but I’d like to keep you to myself for a while. The fewer people who know you’re alive, the fewer the demands on your time will be. Not only that, it also gives us time to find Luke and Leia without interference. The moment the galaxy knows you’re alive is when the bounty hunters will begin looking.’ Vader shook his head. “I can’t, I *won’t*, subject them to that.”

“Neither would I.” she conceded the point softly and then changed the subject. “Will you be long with the Hutt?”

“Are you bored without me to distract you?” his tone was soft and teasing but there was no mistaking the flash in her eyes — the pained reflection of a woman who had no distractions and worries aplenty. “It shouldn’t take as long today. I know there’s not much to keep you occupied in here—”

“I’ll be fine, Ani.”

“Are you—” his stomach chose that moment to make its displeasure at missing dinner the night before known, “-sure?” Her lips twisted as he watched and Vader sighed. “Breakfast first. I don’t have to leave just yet.”

The relief in her eyes nearly smote him but he buried it deep and instead turned her towards the kitchenette where Threepio could be heard messing around with the dishes. “I don’t know what you did to him, but Threepio’s become quite the accomplished chef.”

“He seems to think it’s his job to take care of me.”

“Seems?” Vader chuckled. “It *is* — when I’m not here to do it, that is.”

“Then you shouldn’t criticize him. Threepio knows everything he does about cooking because of everything he’s tried to entice me to eat.”

Vader frowned, not liking the reminder and liking even less the way it wiped the faint smile from her lips and returned the haunted look to her eyes. He tucked her fractionally closer to his side. “No more trying,” he scolded, forcing himself to smile and drawing a questioning look. “I’ll feed you myself if I have to.”

“I’m not a child.”

“And I would *never*,” deliberately, his smile became an appreciative leer, “think of you as one.”

“I’d be worried if you did!”

His smile turned suddenly genuine at the indignation in her tone and interjected a teasing note into his voice to hide the very real concern that she’d fall into old habits if he didn’t do something to change them. “I’ve got this thing for older women,” he teased her, bending his head to brush his lips against her ear. “One former Senator of Naboo in particular.”

“Anyone I know?”

The hitch in her words was gratifying. “Someone...” Vader teased only to lift his head reluctantly as they reached the kitchenette and Threepio came into view and began to speak.

“Oh, Mistress Padmé! And the Master! It is so *good* to see the two of you like this once again!”

“Good morning, Threepio,” Padmé’s greeting was accompanied by a rare, small smile and Vader held his peace as she observed the counters with a shake of her head. “You’ve been busy.”

“Not at all,” the droid denied cheerfully. ‘I simply put together several of your favorite morning meals in the hope that you would find one of them satisfactory.’ If he’d needed to breathe, Vader was certain Threepio would have paused right there, but he just continued, string after string of words. “It is most gratifying to know that you are once again eating. It would be remiss of me to offer something that would change that.”

Vader leaned down as they stepped to the table and she sat, putting his lips to her ear and tuning out the droid. “He has an off switch for a reason, you know.”

The *look* she sent him made him grin as he settled across from her. Threepio quickly brought their meals to the table, chattering all the while about good fortune and continued health. Vader ignored the chatter, as he had almost from the moment he’d switched the droid on, but Padmé seemed to be honestly paying his prattle real attention and Vader observed, amused, as she complimented and commented where appropriate, in between bites of her meal.

She’d taken only a half dozen forkfuls before putting it down to answer one of Threepio’s questions, when Vader finally had enough.

“Threepio.”

“Sir?”

“That’s enough. Let us eat in peace.”

“Oh!” he sounded mortified. “How rude of me! My humblest apologies, Master, I had no intention of—”

“Threepio.”

The droid scuttled from the room immediately, leaving he and Padmé in pace. He turned his gaze back to his wife to find her watching him, her expression serious.

“What?”

“You didn’t have to send him away.”

“He’s preventing you from eating,” he pointed to her half eaten meal with his fork. “You’re still too thin, Padmé. I won’t take any risks with your health.”

“Talking to Threepio is hardly—”

“He’s preventing you from eating,” Vader frowned before spearing another bite off his plate, interrupting her again. ‘And now so am I. Eat.’ He made to bring his fork towards her, “or I’ll feed you myself.”

Padmé lifted her own fork and took another bite even as he ate the one on his own. Their meal passed in relative silence and peace with Threepio gone, but Vader could see he was losing her. The sadness that had been ever present since her arrival was already creeping its way back in. He needed to find the twins for her. Soon. If progress wasn't made quickly, heads would roll and necks would break to ensure he could find someone who would.

Polishing off his food, Vader set his fork aside and took a sip of his drink while observing her. Padmé was chewing slowly, more slowly than before, and he wondered if she was full, his gaze dropping to the barely half cleared plate in front of her. "Not hungry?"

"Full," she countered, after taking a sip of her own drink.

"You should finish what's on your plate."

"I'm full, Anakin."

"I don't—"

"You know I'll make myself sick," she cut him off this time, "if I eat too much so soon after not eating very much for so long. If I'm hungry later, I'll have some more, okay?"

He didn't like it, but could see the logic within her statement. As a kid, he'd gorged himself at almost every meal upon being granted his freedom and spent days regretting it until Qui-Gon and Padmé, ironically, had urged him to eat smaller meals throughout the day. It had taken the promise that there would be food later, and it wouldn't be taken away, to get him to agree to it, but eventually he'd stopped being sick and been able to meal normal sized meals. It had just taken time. "Fine," he agreed reluctantly. "As long as you'll eat later."

"I will."

"Promise?" he pressured her for it, knowing he probably shouldn't, but the memory of her passing out wasn't something he wanted a repeat of.

"I promise, Anakin," her lips twitched. "You're worse than Threepio."

"I have a vested interest in your continued, and improved, good health than Threepio." His counter was soft. "Not just for my sake or yours, but for Luke and Leia — whenever we find them."

It was almost like getting slapped in the face with reality.

Padmé's temper spiked at his words as she pushed back from the table, her hands on the top, her seat crashing to the floor behind her. "You think I don't know that?" the words escaped before she could check them. "You think I *need* the reminder that they're out there somewhere? That they're beyond my reach? Every day, every *minute*, I live with that reality. I have to accept—"

He made to stand, his expression concerned. "Padmé—"

"Don't!" She put her hands out, fending him off when he would have come closer. "I don't want your apologies, or your platitudes! I've been searching for them for *two years*, Anakin! *Two years!*" She practically screamed the accusation at him, unaccountably hurt by the idea

that he felt she needed reminding. “I don’t need to be reminded by their absentee father, who abandoned us for *power*, that I have a reason, or a need, to take care of myself!”

Spinning on her heel, she stormed from the room, narrowly avoiding Threepio who was coming to investigate the ruckus. She didn’t hear what explanation Anakin gave the droid, the unfairness of the whole situation weighing her down. She was shaking. Her stomach clenched, threatening to rebel and expel the food she’d just eaten, and Padmé forced herself to take a deep breath as she stepped up to the viewport and placed both hands on the sill.

The *nerve* of him! How *dare* he presume to think to tell *her* she needed to keep her strength up to find their children?

Her fingers flexed on the sill as Toydaria turned slowly below the viewport, the star at the center of the system lost somewhere behind its mass. Just like Luke and Leia, it was beyond her reach, beyond her view; did he *really* think she needed to be reminded of that? Their absence was like a dull blade to her chest; a seeping, septic wound that was slowly killing her.

Anger seemed to be the only refuge she’d found. Anger at him — for failing her, *them*, when they’d needed him most. Anger at Mon and Bail for taking her children and hiding them, keeping their location from her even now. Anger at the galaxy for not having given up their location yet; she’d searched so much of it, and yet it was only a fraction of the places they could be hiding.

The task before her could take the remainder of her life, *years* that could slip by with her children never knowing their real parents. Years of worry that would kill her, millisecond by millisecond, day by day, until this shell she’d become was nothing more than a whisper of a ghost.

What if we never find them?

The question rose unbidden in her mind, the terror of it barely having the chance to sink its claws into her heart before strong, supportive arms slid around her waist, Anakin’s breath whispering across her cheek. “We’ll find them, Padmé. I promise you.”

His low vow sent her spinning in his arms, her hands pressing against his chest to break his hold. “Stay out of my mind!”

“I wasn’t reading your mind,” he frowned, releasing her a little but not completely, his hands grasping her hips and leaving very little space between them. “I *felt* it.”

“You felt what, Anakin?”

“Your despair.”

One hand lifted to her face and though she stiffened, Padmé allowed him to touch her, needing the reassurance as much as she needed the proof that he was *there*. That she wasn’t imagining the soft smile before her eyes, or the strength in the hands holding her. Until her capture, there had been many a night she’d woken reaching for him with such certainty, only to find her dreams were nothing more than fantasy and her reality the nightmare she feared most. “You shouldn’t.”

“Shouldn’t what?”

“Feel what I’m feeling.”

“You broadcast it, Padmé,” his thumb caressed the curve of her face. ‘Not intentionally, I’m sure, but your feelings on Luke and Leia are unmistakable. I want to help you.’ He paused and smiled faintly. “If you’ll let me.”

“I don’t want your help.” Even as the words left her lips, Padmé knew there was no fire behind them. For all a small, nagging voice in the back of her mind was telling her not to trust him, to not let him hurt her again, she *wanted* to. She couldn’t. Not completely and not fully just yet, but she could accept his offer of help, couldn’t she? Anakin had resources at his finger tips that she could only dream of. If she could just access the galactic database, even for a few minutes, it was possible she might be able to find something her previous attempts had missed.

“You want something of me.”

Hesitating for just a moment, she decided it was worth asking for. Even if he said no, at least she knew where she stood. “Access to your galactic database.” Anakin’s expression darkened for a fraction of a second and Padmé, in her current frame of mind, took it as an instant rejection. She pushed at him, stepping out of his reach and moving back towards the couch. “But you’ll never give it to me, will you? You have to be the hero even now, when just letting me look at it could—”

“I didn’t say no, Padmé.”

“But you didn’t say yes, either,” frustrated, she turned on him. He hadn’t, surprisingly, followed her. “I know where I’ve already looked, Anakin, if you’d just let me search for ten minutes—”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“Five minutes,” she pleaded. “Just give me five minutes, Anakin, and I could—”

“No.”

“No?” It was as if he’d doused her in ice water. “Just ‘No’ — you said you want to help me!”

“I do.”

“I told you how and you won’t even consider it?”

“Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“It’s too dangerous. For you. For them.” He stepped towards her but didn’t reach for her. “The Emperor doesn’t know you survived, Padmé. I can’t let him know. If he knew, he’d do everything he could to take you from me.”

“It’s worth the risk if it means finding Luke and Leia!”

“No it’s not!” he practically snapped, his eyes flashing dangerously. ‘I didn’t spend the better part of the last year trying to get you back just to have you taken away from me again!’ This time he did touch her, his hands settling on her shoulders. “Losing you once practically killed me, Padmé. Losing you again...” Anakin pulled her close and she went willingly,

feeling the sting of tears behind her eyes as his voice trembled, his lips against her temple as he embraced her fiercely. “I’d never survive it.”

The rawness of the statement hit close to home and echoed her own desolation at his abandonment of her and their dreams. Of her own trials when she’d woken to find her world had changed; that her twins had been taken and her husband was gone, overrun and willingly consumed by the monster of Vader. Or so she’d believed. The man holding her wasn’t the monster she’d seen on the holos or read about on the holonet. The man who held her was the man she’d spent many long nights yearning for. Her voice was barely choked, audible whisper. “Anakin—”

“I have people looking for the twins,” he told her gruffly. “People I can trust. They just need a little time.”

“The more time they’re away from us—”

“I know. I know.” he pulled back a little.

Padmé looked up into his face, reminded of a time when she’d been carrying the twins and he’d said a much similar response. Just over two years had passed since that conversation, and yet, she could see echoes of the person he’d been then in him now. Had it really been that long? Had they really changed so much?

“Let me do this my way — for now — okay?” He cracked a half smile. “I want this to end with us as a family, not with gaining Luke and Leia only to lose you. If the price is a few of months of time in exchange for a lifetime together, I’m more than willing to pay it.”

“A few months.” She could feel her heart sinking to her toes, her expression falling. “That’s at least another ninety days, Anakin!”

“Ninety days in exchange for ninety years,” his fingers brushed her hair back from her face. “If I don’t see any progress from my people by then, I’ll let you have access to the database.”

“Thirty days.”

This isn’t a negotiation, Padmé. These things take time.”

“Thirty days, Anakin. If we don’t see results by then, I want to continue my own search.”

“Eighty days.”

“Fifty five,” she shook her head. “I’m not waiting three months for some strangers who’re motivated by credits to try and find our children!”

“Seventy.” He seemed to realize she was serious. “And I’ll help you.”

“Sixty.”

“Seventy, Padmé. This is a delicate operation if we want to find them properly.”

Searching his expression, Padmé reluctantly nodded, seeing she’d get nothing more from him. Seventy days. Ten more weeks of wondering and waiting for a sign that her babies had been found. Ten more weeks for them to grow and forget, if they had any memories of her at

all. Ten more weeks of them wondering why their parents, why their *mother* hadn't wanted them — which couldn't have been further from the truth. "Seventy days."

Vader left his suite not long after the discussion with Padmé, called away by Asajj. He entered the training salle with sweeping steps, his expression dark. "This had best be important, Ventress."

"Master," she practically purred the term, her smile malicious. "I'm so sorry, did I pull you away from your plaything?"

A curl of his fingers and twist of his wrist and she was hanging in the air, gasping for breath as she clutched at her throat. "Your desire for death appears to have been enhanced since our last discussion."

"I... meant no—" she gasped, choking and Vader eased his hold just enough that she could get the minimal air required without passing out, but still be in extreme pain, "-disrespect!"

Vader curled his fingers and then released them, flexing the invisible hand around her throat without letting it go entirely. "The only thing keeping you alive, *my apprentice*, is the fact a Jedi has no dispatched you yet."

"You—" -gasp— "-need me!"

His laughter was low and dark as he drew her forward with a motion of his hand. "The only thing I *need* you for," she continued to thrash and kick, struggling against the hold there was no way for her to break, "is your head — as a gift to the Emperor!"

"I have the lightsabers!" The words rasped from her lips, halting his hand.

Vader eased his grip. He'd have liked nothing better than to continue squeezing the life from her, as he almost had before — this time for good — but her words gave him pause. She'd accomplished her task. Failures, his own Master had readily taught him, were to be punished and successes rewarded. "Show me."

Asajj stretched one hand behind her towards a bundle on the mat of the training salle. "There."

Keeping her elevated, his grip on her throat now enough to just be uncomfortable, but not crippling, Vader stretched out his other hand and called the bundle to him. Using the Force, he unwrapped it to find three lightsaber hilts instead of the two he was expecting. "A bonus?"

"A padawan."

Asajj's feet hit the mat with a muffled *thump* as he released her from the Force grip, keeping one eye on her as she rubbed her throat, the other on the weapons. "A padawan. Advanced enough for their own lightsaber."

"But not for combat," she practically spat the words. "Once the Master was gone, the little one was of no consequence."

"Did you kill it?" Vader lifted both eyes back to the adept. "Or simply steal its weapon?"

“The only good Jedi is a dead Jedi,” she snapped back, visibly trembling as she refrained from going for her weapons. Vader mentally urged her to give into that desire; he could have used a good work out. He was disappointed when she didn’t. “I’d no sooner leave behind a Jedi brat than you would!”

Looking at her and knowing her history, Vader had no reason to doubt her. “As expected.” He flipped the bundle closed. “It’s rumored that Jedi Master Fisto was seen on Belkadan and two more Jedi sightings of a human on Eriadu and a Bimm Jedi on Balmorra.”

“Master Fisto.”

“A rumor only,” Vader cautioned her. “Balmorra is closest, I recommend you begin there. The sighting is solid and there is an informant on the ground in the area of the Jedi.”

“This will take some time, Master; the planets are scattered across the galaxy.”

“All the more reason,” turning to go, he opened the door, “for you to leave immediately.”

“Trying to keep me away from your precious Padmé, Skywalker?”

“If you wish to keep your tongue,” Vader didn’t even turn as he picked her up in a force grip and slammed her into the wall hard enough for the audible *crack* of bone, “keep it in your head. Disappear, Ventress, and do not return for some time — unless you wish to leave in pieces.”

Author’s Note: My apologies for waiting until the end of the month, it’s been a rather difficult one that has left me no time for me and several parts of this chapter needed heavy editing off the first draft. I’ll see everyone in the spring/summer — stay safe everyone!

Month Twenty Five, Day 17 PEF

Chapter 79

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Five, Day Seventeen PEF

Late Morning

Several days passed in almost a blur for Padmé as Anakin seemed to spring to life before her very eyes. Vader had disappeared, almost entirely, and had been replaced by the man she'd fallen in love with over a half a decade ago. He was kind and thoughtful, but forceful; the man he'd become before the wars had taken their toll.

He showered her with attention. With his negotiations with the Hutts completed, he was making time for her during the day. Apparently, as they waited for the contract to be ratified and approved by the government, all they could do was idle until an approval or denial. The men, he'd told her, were on drill rotations, leaving him free to spend his days with her.

It was a bit like when they'd gotten married and had been able to spend all of their time together under the guise of Anakin adapting to his new mechanical arm. What no one knew was that he'd mastered it just hours after having had it installed, practicing on *her* to get his fine motor control.

And what fine motor control it was.

"Anakin," she shifted as he embraced her from behind, blocking her against the counter as she was washing tubers for adding to the stew that would be their lunch. She shivered as he nuzzled her neck. "Not fair."

"Ask me to stop," he told her with a grin she could feel against her skin as he nipped her. "Ask and I will."

"When has asking you to stop ever had any effect?"

"Rarely," he agreed, smiling, "but then, you rarely want me to stop anyway."

"You're incorrigible."

"You like me that way."

"Anakin," shying away from the touch of his lips against her neck, Padme tried to continue her task, "I'm in the middle of-."

"It can wait."

"Is that all you think about?"

"It didn't used to be; now that you're here," his breath feathered across her skin again followed by his teeth, "I can't seem to help myself."

"Anakin—"

"Whatever you're doing, it can wait."

"I thought you wanted me to eat more."

That gave him pause and she flashed him a grin.

One he promptly wiped off her face when he covered it in a passionate kiss. The knife fell to the board as he swept her up in his arms, breaking the kiss only as he left the kitchen. "I do want you to eat more. That's why," he opened the door to their bedchamber with a thought, "I'm going to help you work up an appetite. A very... *large* appetite."

Her laughter was cut off moments later as he kissed her again, stepped through the door, and it shut behind them.

Padme returned to the kitchen after Anakin returned to his daily duties, finishing off what would now become their dinner after making herself a sandwich. Eating while she worked, she deftly turned the pile of vegetables she'd left on the counter into a pile of cubes and slices.

Washing them after the fact, they were thrown into a pot, set to simmer, and the timer set.

It didn't take her long, especially with Anakin out of the apartment and no one else to distract her, to finish her task. A glance at the chrono showed her that it was still early afternoon; hours yet before Anakin would finish with his responsibilities.

Pushing aside the uncomfortable sensation in her mind that thinking of just *what* those duties might be, Padme tried hard not to focus on them. She didn't want it to break through the happy bubble she was building around herself. She finally, after all this time, didn't feel so alone anymore. She didn't feel as if she had to fight and struggle to find her... to find *their* children on her own.

Despite that, and all that she wanted to deny, the ever cautious and distrustful part of her that had been burned and broken by Anakin's betrayal, counseled caution.

Anakin might have come back to her, but could she trust this transformation? Could she really trust that the man who'd only so recently shown her such disregard and disdain, yet compassion and acceptance, was really *her* Anakin and not just what she so desperately wanted to see?

Could she trust him?

Padme didn't know.

Her happy mood was slowly dissolving as she was left to her own devices, the fears and doubts creeping back in. Vader had vanished so quickly, she hadn't questioned the fact that Anakin was beside her again. Now, with time to think, doubts and fears crept back in and she

couldn't help but wonder if he was pretending to be what she wanted him to be simply because it got him what he wanted.

Anakin wouldn't manipulate her like that; he loved her to a fault. But then, that had been his downfall, hadn't it? He'd been terrified to lose her and, in that terror and fear, turned away from everything he'd ever known for a chance to save her. It was almost comical, but sweet — in a deranged and twisted way — at the same time.

Is he really Anakin?

The thought was disturbing and she struggled to push it aside, rationalizing that she wouldn't have slept with him, *made love with him*, if he wasn't. He sounded and acted like Anakin, but then so had Vader on Mustafar when she'd first arrived, just as Vader had sounded like Anakin more than a few times since she'd arrived on his ship. Could she trust this sudden shift? The lack of Vader-esque qualities made her uneasy; it was a difficult realization to acknowledge.

Turning on her heel, Padmé went straight for the 'fresher and, digging under the main sanitization unit, found several bottles of cleaners that were collecting dust. She needed something to do and, despite the fact the droids kept the place immaculate, she was going to clean it anyway. Something, *anything*, to keep from talking herself out of the only true slice of happiness she'd felt since Anakin's fall and the twins had been taken.

After everything she'd been through, she wasn't about to relinquish it without a fight. Even if she didn't yet know exactly what she was fighting to keep.

Vader scanned through the images he'd retrieved from Threepio, continuing to search for clues as to whom had been with Padmé, other than his old Master, when she'd given birth. He recognized a few fragments of Threepio's memory — like the Polis Masa base — but those fragments were useless to him. His agents and spies had already searched the location and found nothing.

All of the data had been destroyed.

Someone had been methodical enough to even try and reformat Threepio; a botched job, fortunately. The droid's memories were the only ones Vader could rely on to give him some clue as to who his wife's companions had been. It was, until she told him her own suspicions, his only possible clue to finding who had taken the twins. He was certain they'd been taken from her while she'd been in her coma — he naturally shied away from the *how* she had ended up that way — and somewhere in Threepio's memory banks there had to be *something* to give him a hint.

Padmé change of heart gave him hope, but Vader was no fool. All it would take was for her to see through the illusion he was building and he would be back to the position he'd started in. The last thing he wanted was to lose his wife again and, this time he knew it would be for good.

Despite everything Padmé had seen him do, despite everything she'd witnessed, somehow she still believed that he wasn't the person he was. How it was possible, Vader didn't know, but he intended to build that illusion as large as he could, to keep her blinded to the things she

didn't want to, *couldn't*, accept. As long as she didn't believe he was capable of what she called atrocities, he wouldn't let her bear witness to any.

He was mulling over how to do just that, when an image in Threepio's memory recordings caught his eye and he froze, staring at it.

Wide eyed to start with, he quickly narrowed his gaze, his jaw clenching as the image of Padme working at a desk turned into an image of a man with long hair standing behind her. The man in the holo began to run his hands over Padme's shoulders, visibly squeezing them as if to get her to relax. It turned into a massage that went down over her chest a little too far to be impersonal and, to his horror, his *wife* allowed it. Not only did the image of her allow it, but she noticeably leaned into the caress.

Vader's gut reaction was visceral. *How dare he put his hands on my Padme?!*

The holo suddenly vanished as there was the crushing, sparking sound of damaged electronics and the projector crumpled under the weight of his fury.

This then was the man his wife had spoken of. Vader refused to even *think* his name and, as he stared at the projector, his chest hurting, all he could think was for the outcome he couldn't doubt. As soon as he found him, the interloper would die. Nothing else would assuage the affront; the *gall* of the man! Putting his hands on Vader's wife; whatever death wish the cretin had, Vader would fulfill it and more.

Unable to stay in his office after watching such a blatant violation of his wife's person, and completely disregarding the fact she'd obviously been a willing participant, Vader headed for the brig. There were still things he could do that would assuage his need to kill something in that moment and prisoners of war, condemned to the formality of a trial and inevitable execution just meant he'd have an outlet.

He'd deal with the consequences of his actions later... if there were any.

Padmé was trying not to count the days. Seventy days had been her agreement with Anakin for access to his database, but even with the agreement, she wanted access sooner. He didn't have all the information and for all she *wanted* to trust him, to *believe* that her Anakin was the man before her, something stayed her hand.

She wasn't loyal to Mon Mothma or Bail, per say, but she wasn't stupid either. If she gave up the names of the Rebellion ring leaders, she was also dooming the fledgling movement. A movement that she'd once believed in and held hundreds of thousands of innocents. Innocents who had nothing to do with Bail or Mon Mothma's actions. Innocent people whose hopes and dreams rode on the very *chance* of true freedom that the Rebellion represented and she wouldn't, *couldn't*, jeopardize that. Until she was without a doubt *certain* Anakin could be trusted to not reveal their other activities, and the network of rebellion cells that were starting to litter the Galaxy, she couldn't risk exposing them.

Which left her furious.

Seventy days had been four days ago and each day, for all they were better days than she'd had in a long time, were an agony inside. Four more days without her children in her arms,

just the holo that endlessly shifted from Luke to Leia and back. While it was a comfort, it was also a visible torture. Her *babies* were no longer babies. Someone else had to have heard their first words and seen their first steps. Milestones of their lives she'd never be able to get back. She was determined not to miss any others if she could help it. If that meant she gave Anakin the chance to find them with his network of spies and informants, a network that far exceeded her own, that was what she had to do.

"Oh my darlings." She reached out from her seat on the couch and touched the flicking holo. "Mommy misses you. So, so much. Where are you?"

"Mistress Padmé! Mistress Padmé!"

Lifting her head from the holo, she turned to find Threepio advancing towards her from around the corner in what she privately called his excited gait. He couldn't exactly run, but it didn't stop him from trying. "What is it, Threepio?"

"You have a visitor, Mistress Padme."

Visitor?

As far as she knew, no one knew where she was. Anakin had cautioned her against allowing anyone to know her location and while it made for lonely days and nights when he wasn't with her, Padme had reluctantly acknowledged the wisdom in his caution. If the Emperor found out about her continued existence, she didn't think he'd be happy. In fact, she suspected he would have her killed immediately. What Anakin would *do* with that order was a different question entirely.

Much as she would have loved the company, Padmé hesitated, weighing the risks. If the person had come to see her *specifically*, then turning them away did nothing but deny her exposure to different company. Not to mention that allowing them entry wouldn't matter as to her survival because they obviously already knew she was here.

"Mistress?"

Coming back to the moment, she regarded Threepio and then asked the only question she could. "Did they ask for me by name?"

"Yes, mistress."

"Well then?"

"They refuse to enter, Mistress. They asked you come to the door."

More and more intrigued, Padmé followed Threepio back to the entrance of the suite. Inside the door was the head of her security detail; generally they remained outside the suite. "Commander?"

"Apologies, my lady," Grange, the head of her detail, removed his helmet and bowed to her respectfully. "Lieutenant Adams asked I deliver a message to Lord Vader."

"He's not here, Commander." The mention of the Lieutenant still stung; that Anakin had allowed a member of his crew to be present for the birth of *their* child when she hadn't even gotten to *hold* hers...

Padmé suddenly felt ashamed for being so petty.

She'd have done anything, even risked death, to have had the chance. Lieutenant Adams had needed to risk Vader's wrath; he'd very likely risked death based on everything she'd head. In retrospect, Vader giving Lieutenant Adams the time he'd needed to be with his young family might have been the first *real* spark of Anakin she'd seen... and she hadn't even taken notice!

"My Lady, are you alright?"

Shaking herself out of her thoughts, she focused on the Commander again. "I'm sorry, Commander, what was the message?"

The clone pulled two items from his belt and offered them to her. Padmé accepted the holo and data discs with a questioning look. Grange looked uncomfortable. "The holo contains a recorded message from the Lieutenant's wife and their daughter. The data disc is a written thank you, along with details on how to reply if you should so choose."

"I wasn't aware that anyone knew I was on board, Commander."

"No matter how tight the security, there are always rumors, my Lady." The Commander looked uncomfortable. "I would say that the Lieutenant is covering all of his options and unwilling to risk offending Lord Vader after being granted a boon."

"Which is why you brought them to me." Padmé finally understood. If there was something on the disks that even hinted that the Lieutenant knew she was alive, his life and the lives of his new family would be in jeopardy. Anakin was overly protective of her to the point of obsessive secrecy; he'd do *whatever* was necessary to protect her. "I'll take a look; thank you, Commander."

He inclined his head in return and put his helmet back on. "My thanks, Lady Vader."

The title made her flinch for all it was something she knew they saw it as a title of respect, but Grange was gone before she could protest, the door closing behind him.

Taking the data discs, Padmé turned them over in her hands, debating if she should just tuck them away and pretend they had never been delivered, or if she risked the heartache of watching a mother with her new baby thank Anakin for his consideration in allowing the Lieutenant to be present for the birth of their child. Her indecision lasted all of a moment; the Commander would be in serious trouble if the Lieutenant asked Anakin if his message had been delivered. Better to watch it and get it over with. If nothing else, maybe it could be a happy moment they would later share when Anakin returned from his duties.

With swift steps, she headed back to the sitting area and collected her readers, switching out the discs and settling herself on the sofa. Not quite ready to see another mother with their smiling child, she started with the data disc. The note was brief.

Lord Vader,

Thank you for allowing my leave to be present for the birth of my daughter, Analynne. I'd had no hope of attending her birth and was told not to ask.

Your merciful allowance could only be from someone who is also a father. As I've not heard an announcement of your fatherhood, please be assured that no one will hear it from

my wife, Ieliene, or I. We understand the need for discretion for a man in your position; should you ever need anything from us, we are yours to command.

To you and your partner, we wish you the best.

Sincerely,

Connor, Ieliene and Analyne Adams

Padmé stared at the missive, tears tracking silently down her cheeks. For all she'd been furious that Connor had been given the chance to rush to Ieliene's side, with how desperately she'd wished for Anakin at hers, she couldn't begrudge them their obvious happiness. Even if it did bring home the fact that she was still without her children.

Unable to look at the holo just yet, Padmé closed her eyes and exhaled a shaky breath as she rubbed her hands over her face, trying not to give in to the despair that had been drowning her for so long. *Sixty seven days.* Anakin had asked her for time to find the twins and she'd reluctantly agreed.

Sixty seven days.

Hopefully, by the end of all this, they'd be back in her arms where they belonged.

Evening

By the time evening rolled around, Vader was feeling more like himself.

He'd convinced himself that the holo he'd found had been more innocent than he'd first seen; Padmé wouldn't have left something like that for him to *find*. She was his *wife*; perhaps she just needed to be reminded again of it. Shortly after coming to this conclusion, he'd received word that Ventress had sent notification that she had landed on Balmorra and begun her search for the Jedi. She would not be in contact again until her tasks were complete.

Satisfied she would do as instructed, and stay away from Padmé for the time being, he filed away her missive and turned his attention to the more pressing matter of Padmé's continued fragile health and the lesson he'd need to teach her. "You're sure it's just malnutrition?"

Artoo replied with a series of beeps and whistles that made Vader grimace, ending with a very rude sound that had him shooting the astromech droid a dirty look. "This is *not* my fault. If Obi-Wan hadn't—"

Cutting him off, Artoo continued to trundle down the hall at his side as they were headed for Vader's quarters, his electronic voice now a squeal of admonishment.

"Don't give me that." Vader shot his droid a frustrated look. "You didn't like getting back there any more than I did and finding them gone. You can't tell me you're not excited to be reunited with Threepio."

The unexpectedly rude response he got in return made Vader let loose with a bark of laughter. "Keep telling yourself that, my friend. Maybe, one day, I'll even believe it."

Turning the corner to enter the hall where his quarters were, Vader smirked when Artoo replied sullenly but remain firmly at his side. The little droid might deny having missed Threepio, but Vader knew better. The droids were like he and Padmé; parts of a greater whole that needed to be together to be whole. He might not have known it at the time, but when he'd built Threepio as a child, he'd been building him for Padmé. Just as the Nabooians had unknowingly built Artoo for him.

The guards at the door of his chambers saluted in unison. "Lord Vader."

He acknowledged them with a nod. "Is everything ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"The serving droids just left, sir; they weren't certain if you wanted them to stay."

"Not tonight." Vader waved them away. "Dismissed. We won't be needing you further tonight."

"Sir."

As one, they stepped away, just as Artoo beeped a query.

"No, Artoo," Vader waited until the troopers had turned the corner and were out of earshot. 'Now that she's finally given up this fiction that I'm not me, the guards aren't to keep her here, they're here for her protection. Even with Ventress gone, it's not very safe for her to be out of our quarters. Not,' he added with a self-satisfied smirk as he reached for the control panel, "that I intend to let her even *think* of leaving them any time soon."

Another rude beep from Artoo made him chuckle. "Keep telling yourself that Artoo. Come morning, I should be able to talk her into taking a trip or two."

Artoo stopped chattering at him as Vader opened the door and stepped inside. There, before him, was a bewildered Padmé, staring at his surprise in shock.

"Anakin? What is all this?"

"Don't tell me you've forgotten," he teased, hanging his cloak by the door before turning to take in the details of his handiwork.

He hadn't been able to adjust the furniture, but the droids had moved a large table for two into the main area of his suite, with two high backed chairs. Platters and plates littered a sideboard, stacked with dishes Padmé had once introduced him to back on Naboo. The pile of shuura fruit caught his eye. Lifting one eyebrow at her, he wasn't nearly as disappointed as he should have been when she slowly shook her head.

Lifting one hand without taking his eyes from her, he plucked one of the fruit from the bowl and telekinetically brought it to his hand, letting it levitate there as he cocked his head at her, his voice unintentionally husky when he spoke next. "You changed my life that night, Padmé."

"I tried to break your heart that night."

"And you did." Vader could see the memory in her eyes as he idly lifted the shuura and sent it gracefully to cross the distance between them. "Until Geonosis."

The fruit hung before her but Padmé made no move to take it.

“Have you lost your taste for the sweetness?”

She smiled faintly, her color high. “You haven’t cut it yet.”

His smile rose to match hers and he crossed the room on light steps to her chair, pulling it out for her as he kept the fruit before her. She moved, taking her seat, and Vader ensured she was seated before moving to take his own. The Fruit he dropped gently into his dish before taking up his utensils with a smirk her way and slicing into it. “This is nice.”

“Anakin, you didn’t have to do this.”

“I wanted to,” for a lot of reasons he wasn’t going to get into. ‘I don’t spoil you enough; I’ve never really had the chance.’ Without missing a beat, he lifted the cut fruit and telekinetically drifted it to her. Several pieces went into her dish, but he kept the base of the fruit in the air so she could spear it like the night when he’d confessed his feelings for her. He waited until she did and took a small bite. “There was always an order or a Master trying to keep us apart. Now, we can finally have some time together, just us.”

“But, Anakin... Luke and Leia—”

“Are out there and we *will* find them,” he told her firmly. “There’s nothing we can do about it tonight, Padmé. I have all of my considerable resources searching for them. Tonight let’s just me us; a husband who can spoil his wife with all her favorite foods.”

She gasped as he lifted his hand and waved it towards the side table, lifting the lids on various dishes at once. He’d had the ship’s chef recreate their meal, plus a couple of her favorites that had been absent that day. “Oh, Anakin...”

“Is that a yes?”

He saw her struggle, looking around at everything he’d done before glancing at the sitting room where she spent most of her time.

And then her stomach let out a loud, deep growl that had her eyes shooting to his guiltily. There was a heartbeat of silence before they began to chuckle, together, and she finally nodded. “I’d like that.”

So they did.

Vader wined and dined his wife, making her smile, something he’d seen far too seldom since her return to him. He made it his mission to keep her smiling as they worked through the various courses. He kept the topics light, mostly speaking about their share memories of the night he was trying to recreate.

They finished dinner and move to the sofa with their goblets, trading small talk about their day and sipping wine before a simulated fire.

He watched her closely as she curled up next to him, but not against him, allowing him a good view of her reactions. The silent between them was, finally, comfortable and he wanted to keep it that way.

Waiting until she was settled, he chose his moment carefully, his eyes half hooded as he watched for her reaction. “You drove me mad in the dress you wore that night.” His admission was easy; he’d told her before, but it was worth repeating. “I spent a good deal of the night looking at you in it and wondering how to get it off.”

“Anakin!”

“It’s not the first time I’ve told you. And it is a compliment.”

“To you, maybe, but the way you said it doesn’t seem very complimentary!”

“Then I have a secret,” he lifted his wine glass, taking a sip before he spoke again, his voice a near whispered tease. “Would you like to hear it?”

“After that?” Her reciprocation of his tease was unexpectedly delightful. “I don’t know if I should.”

Vader leaned in close, setting his drink on the table as he locked his gaze with hers, reaching out to take her glass before setting it next to his without looking. Gently, deliberately, he ran the backs of his fingers over her cheek. “From the moment I met you, all those years ago, not a day goes by where I haven’t thought about you.”

Padmé burst out laughing. “Anakin!”

Despite her laughter, Vader was able to keep his expression serious, his heated gaze locked on hers, and her laughter died when he didn’t join in with her, her brow furrowing.

“Anakin?”

In other circumstances, the loss of her mirth and her uncertainty would have concerned him. Right now, he wanted her to know he was being serious. “Those words are as true now as they were then, Padmé. You’re the blood in my veins, the fire in my soul.” Her eyes widened as he continued, softly stroking her cheek with his thumb as he *urged* her to hear him. To understand his sincerity. ‘You give my life a purpose; a direction. Without you, I’m adrift. Anchorless.’ Her hand came up to cover his. “Without you, there is no joy in this galaxy; in any galaxy.”

“Anakin...”

“Will you give me the chance to give you, to *show* you the joys you bring me?”

“It’s all I’ve ever wanted.” The words seemed torn from her. “To share everything with you, Anakin.”

His thumb ran over her bottom lip and he leaned in, as if to kiss her, hesitating a breath away as he breathed his next question to her. “Everything?”

His gaze searched hers, and Padmé looked back at him. He could see the naked want and sorrow in her eyes, the sorrow much diminished from when she’d first come back to him. If he had any say, it would be gone before long.

Her lips parted but Vader didn’t let her respond. His mouth cover hers, his kiss trying to convey all that he would do for her, all he *wanted* to give her. And Padmé responded, her hands sliding into his hair, her nails scraping his scalp as her fingers burrowed for purchase.

Understanding the invitation and desperation in her kiss, Vader wasn't about to let it go unanswered; he eased her back to the sofa, his hands already tracing the contours of her body as he drew a low moan of need from her, toying with her body like a musician with a beloved instrument.

The night, when it finally ended, was nearly dawn.

Month Twenty Five, Day 20 PEF

Chapter 80

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Five, Day Twenty PEF

Early morning

Padme woke to an empty bed and the feel of cool sheets, frowning as she realized that Anakin wasn't beside her as normal. "Anakin?"

Her gaze turned towards the 'fresher, listening, but the door was open and the lights off. Sliding from the bed, she shrugged into her dressing gown and stepped out of the bedroom, expecting to find him in the main rooms. The suite was quiet, Artoo and Threepio charging in the corner and mercifully silent in the early morning hour.

"Anakin?"

The lights were off in the food prep area and only the continually shifting holo of the twins shed any light in the sitting area. Despite this, Padme searched, calling for him, an uneasy feeling steeling her breath and making it come up short. No flimsi or datapad had been left, no note to tell her where he'd gone. A moment later, as she passed the viewport, she belatedly realized what could have happened. Had he been called away by his commanders? It was easy to forget she was on a Stardestroyer when she didn't often leave their quarters, and she'd almost forgotten he had responsibilities to his fleet.

The last three days had been... immersive.

Padmé tried to go back to bed, slipping under the now cold covers with a shiver only to stare at the ceiling for a long minutes. Faint flashes of blue and white danced across the tiles, highlighting the indents and curves, drawing her idle gaze across the smooth surface even as she couldn't sleep. The flicker of the light, suddenly refocused her as she watched the colors shift on the roof. Frowning, she sat up, looking towards the source. Had she missed him?

"Anakin?"

As before, there was no answer, just the silence and the dark with the faint flicker.

Reaching for her robe, Padmé padded back into the main living area, searching for the light. Nearby, the droids continued to charge. While their lights *were* flickering, but away from what she'd seen. Bypassing them, she headed into the main room where she'd spent many hours on the sofa. She wasn't sure how she'd missed it before, but the light was the slowly shifting holo of the twins, sitting on the table where she'd left it, and casting a cool glow over the room as it shifted through their ages.

Staring at it for a moment, Padmé found she was mesmerized until a faint sound drew her attention. Tilting her head, she focused on the buzzing sounds, tilting her head when she realized that it came from Anakin's office.

Voices?

Was Anakin meeting with someone at this hour?

Her curiosity piqued, she stepped on silent feet to the door, pressing her ear to it and holding her breath. Focusing on the other side, she strained to hear... and heard the gasp of a woman.

No. Anakin wouldn't... He...

Padmé forced herself to breathe and think. Anakin had worked hard to reestablish their relationship, he wouldn't have another woman in his office. Shaking the feeling off even as an uncomfortable knot settled in her stomach, Padmé checked the door to find it was closed but not locked. Normally a door that would slide open under the controls, she'd done enough missions before her capture where she'd had to manually open similar doors. Pressing gently on it, she jimmied it open a fraction of an inch and then another, just enough that she could see inside.

Anakin was at his desk, a holo playing before him, one hand clenched, his gaze fixated on what he was watching. She watched his jaw clench, his eyes narrow and then a painful flinch cross his face, as if he'd been struck.

Not sure what he could possibly be watching that would generate such a visceral response, Padmé straightened to gain a better view and focused on the holo. Her eyes widened with growing horror as she realized what he was watching. Pushing the door open, she stepped straight into his office, trying to draw his attention — and failed.

Swallowing hard, her gaze went back to the holo, seeing herself and *Max* through what had to be Threepio's visual processors. Even as she watched, she saw herself stepping into the slicer's arms. "Anakin." Her voice cracked as she spoke his name, finally identifying the *hurt* on his face. She stepped closer, "Anakin... what are you... *why* are you watching..." she stopped. "Turn it off."

He didn't look up; didn't react.

Padmé spoke again, unable to help the break in her voice even as she raised it. "*Ani.*"

He finally twitched, lifting his gaze from the image of her kissing another man, looked up at her, his gaze haunted. *Hurt*. It was a look she was well familiar with and one she'd never hoped to see again. He didn't acknowledge her, simply *looked* at her so Padmé repeated herself. "Turn it off, Ani."

He regarded her for a long moment before slowly reaching out and doing as she requested. The blue image of her and Max disappeared, casting the office into darkness, but for the faint light from the holo in the living area behind her. For a long moment there was silence between them. Then, Anakin broke it. "I hate it."

She could feel the burn of his gaze on her even as she knew of what he spoke; the holo was self explanatory.

"I hate this, Padmé, I hate the thought of someone else touching you, *knowing* you the way I do. You're mine; you've *always* been mine and the thought that *he* touched—"

Crossing the room in a flurry of movement, she slid her hand across his lips to silence his words, feeling them tearing into her heart as if they were knives. "Anakin..." He trembled

under her touch and Padmé didn't think, she simply acted, sliding into his lap and wrapping her arms around his waist as she pressed her lips to his jaw. "Don't do this, Ani... don't think about it."

"I can't help it."

She felt the raggedness of his words even as she heard it, powerless to stop them as he continued.

"I didn't believe it, didn't *want* to believe it. I had to see the holos, to *know*... and I hate it. I hate knowing that *he* touched you; that you *let* him touch you."

"And you think I don't?" his words touched a nerve, drawing the confession from her before she could stop it. "You think I don't hate the idea of knowing that someone else touched you? That someone else shared your bed; that *you* let her?" Padmé swallowed past the knot in her throat. "I hate it, too, Anakin; I hate it more than I can say... but I can't change it." Tilting her head, she looked into his face to find his piercing blue eyes looking straight back at her. She cupped his cheek in one hand, caressing his cheek bone with her thumb. "What's done is done, Ani. We can't change the past... no matter how much we might want to."

His gaze searched hers, reflecting the faint light of the holo from the next room and giving them an almost electric appearance. He seemed to be searching for something and she let him, looking straight back at him, searching his gaze as he searched hers. When he spoke, it wasn't what she was expecting.

"No; we can't... but, if you *could*..." he regarded her for a long moment before forging ahead, "...what *would* you change?"

It was an easy answer.

"Never having lost Luke and Leia."

"Not me?"

Padmé searched his gaze, trying to see into the depths of his thoughts only to find an unexpected vulnerability. It had cost him something to ask that question and chance her answering in a way that would pain him. "If I had the choice, Anakin, I wouldn't have lost any of you. Not Luke. Not Leia. Not you."

He breathed out a ragged sigh, pulling her close as his forehead touched hers, his arms wrapping about her tightly. "You've found me, Padmé," his breath whispered across her lips, "I'm right here."

Unable to help herself, she couldn't release his gaze even as her heart squeezed painfully in her chest. "I hope you're right, Anakin."

"I am." His hands slid from around her to cup her face, his thumbs taking their turn to trace the curve of her cheek bones. "I *promise*."

She couldn't have kept the smile from her lips even if she'd tried. Leaning forward, she pressed her lips to his, affirming his promise. Anakin returned her kiss, but it didn't deepen it as so many of their other kisses had of late. Instead, he broke the kiss, smiling faintly at her

as he readjusted his hold, sliding his arms about her waist. “Would you like to watch our children together, my love?”

“Watch?”

Anakin turned his chair and adjusted her position so she was sitting more comfortably in his lap. Padmé tilted her head to his shoulder as he pressed a couple of buttons on the console of his desk and an image appeared. Infants, in a nursery, and together in the same bassinet. Padmé blindly reached for his hand, taking it in her own as they watched the twins in silence, the blue light from the holo casting them both into stark relief. His hand in hers as they watched *their* children was almost healing in a way.

They didn’t speak, simply held one another as they watched Luke and Leia’s images shift through all of the recorded memories that Threepio’s databanks had given up. If they were fuzzy in places, or incomplete, Padmé found she didn’t mind. The corruption of the data just made them all the more genuine.

How long they sat curled together in his office chair, Padmé didn’t know. Watching their children together was peace itself, despite the fact Luke and Leia weren’t with them. Wrapped so completely in the calm of his touch and the *rightness* of sharing this moment, Padmé’s eyes grew heavy. Anakin’s arm around her waist was heavy, reassuring. His breathe feathered across her cheek, his cheek against the top of her head, and without conscious of the decision, she slipped away, back into slumber.

Late afternoon

Padmé busied herself outside of the suite after waking to find herself in bed and Anakin missing for the second time that day.

Using her escort, she spend several hours in the training room, Threepio keeping her company for the first few minutes before she sent him away. He was a reminder of what she’d seen Anakin watching last night. While Threepio hadn’t played a part in any of her choices, he’d recorded them. Passively or not, he was a reminder that she didn’t need right now.

That Anakin was watching what she’d done with Max made her sick to her stomach. How could he stand it? If there had been holos of him and *Asajj*... Padmé wasn’t certain she *could* have watched it. It would have shattered her heart and widened the rift that just knowing about the infidelity had caused. That he’d thought her dead didn’t make any difference; Anakin had always been devoted, that he would stray was hard to accept.

To *see* it would have been impossible to forgive.

That he’d been able to hold her after watching the holos from Threepio’s memory banks was eye opening and it pained her to think that the very droid he’d gifted her with had contributed to his pain.

Working herself into a good sweat and feeling more healthy than she had in a long time, Padmé focused on a routine of jumps and kicks, borrowing one of the punching bags to work on her form.

It was there, as the hour was nearing the time for the evening meal, that Anakin found her. She was so focused on her activities, that she didn't notice the sound of the door opening. It wasn't until she *felt* his gaze on her that she realized she wasn't alone.

Gasping for breath, she turned to look, one hand on the bag to keep her balance, to find Anakin leaning against the door jamb, a faint smile on his lips. His hair was loose around his shoulders and he looked so much in that moment the man she'd told about wanting to have the baby back on Naboo, the man she'd been so in love with, that the shock of it blindsided her. She stumbled.

Anakin was instantly there, taking her in his arms with a soft admonishment. "Easy, Padmé. When was the last time you had something to drink?"

She couldn't remember and a moment later semi-cool liquid was passing her lips, hydrating her dry mouth. Drinking eagerly, she gulped down the water only to have it taken away.

"Not to fast; it doesn't look like you've been taking care of yourself today."

She was still gulping down air and couldn't respond, opening her hand towards the bottle.

"Slowly, my love." Anakin's familiar chuckle was followed by the brush of his breath across her cheek. "*Breathe.*"

Doing as he asked, Padmé focused on her breathing, closing her eyes unconsciously as she sought to regain her inner equilibrium. More and more, the man before her was the man he'd been before the wars; the father of her children and the man she'd fallen in love with. Flashes of overlapping movements and thoughts, feelings, had become common place, some stronger than others, and this was had been destabilizing. As she regained her ability to breathe normally, Anakin's hand gently rubbing her back, she couldn't help but wonder why *this* memory had hit her so hard.

It wasn't until she was about to open her eyes that it hit her.

That had been their first discussion about the twins after he'd learned of her pregnancy. They'd been so happy...

"Feeling better?"

Her eyes snapped open to find his face, *Anakin's* face right before her, and her hand lifted unconsciously to brush his hair back from his cheek. "Some," she said at length. Anakin handed her the water bottle and, under his watchful eye, slowly sipped from it. As she drank, she studied him. He looked tired, wary, as if there were something he had to say but didn't relish the ideas. "Is... something wrong?"

"Not exactly."

"Anakin."

His chuckle at his admonishment was short before his expression became serious again. "I have news."

"Luke?" her breath caught in her throat as the blood began to pound at her temples. "Leia?"

“Maybe,” he hedged, “I’ve a lead that could be them.”

Sixty six days. Would she need to search herself? “Could be?”

“The intel says that the children are twins; the right age. A boy and a girl.”

“Human, I hope.”

“So I’m told.” Anakin cupped her cheek. “I will need to go look for myself; this is the most promising lead yet.”

“Let me come with you.”

“What?”

Padmé had spoken before thinking, but even as Anakin looked at her in surprise, she didn’t regret saying it. Holding his gaze, she repeated herself. “Let me come with you.”

“No, Padmé.”

“Anakin—”

“You’ve only just started recovering from months of malnutrition and fatigue, I don’t think —”

“But I do!”

“Taking you with me means potentially exposing that you survived, Padmé.” Anakin shook his head, “I won’t risk you for a maybe.”

“Not even if that maybe turns out to be true?” Padmé wasn’t above begging for the *chance* to see her children, however slim. “If it is Luke and Leia, I don’t want to be aware from them a second longer than I have to!”

“Padmé—”

Her fingers covered his lips, her gaze searching his. “Please, Anakin. *Please.*” He regarded her for a long moment, watching her, watching him, and she knew he was wavering. She twisted the knife a little more. “*I need this.*”

Anakin’s shoulders sagged a little and he kissed her finger tips. “Alright. But there will be conditions. I won’t have found you now, only to lose you upon finding the twins.”

“Anything so I can be there, Anakin. Name it and I’ll do it.”

“You’ll go in disguise.”

Padmé nodded, feeling her spirits soar.

“You won’t speak with my contact or the children until we have a confirmation that they *are* Luke and Leia.”

That one would be harder, but she nodded to show her agreement. If the twins *were* Luke and Leia, she could wait until they were alone. She hoped.

“If this is a wild shaak chase,” Anakin smiled faintly, “you’ll join me on holiday afterwards.”

“Holiday? Ani...”

“I’m serious, Padmé. Keeping you here, close to all these reminders, can’t be easy. My sources have three months to search for the twins if this lead doesn’t pan out. If it doesn’t, let’s go away, just you and me. Like we used to be.”

“I don’t know, Anakin... with Luke and Leia—”

“We can’t do anything here, my love.” Anakin gently brushed the sweat damp hair from her cheek and offered her a charming, coaxing smile. “While I set up our trip to see these children, will you please just think about it?”

With a sigh, Padmé reluctantly nodded. “Alright, Anakin. I’ll think about it.”

Evening

Anakin helped her back to their quarters, offering to join her in the shower, much to her delight. With the news that the twins might have been found buoying her spirits, Padmé felt like celebrating. Her children were potentially in reach and, when they were found, they’d have both of their parents. A united unit who wanted to love them unconditionally and see them grow into strong individuals.

If there was a faint, nagging voice in the back of her mind that was telling her otherwise and advocating caution, Padmé viciously buried it.

The Anakin who held her, made love to her and *worried* about her, was the man she’d married. He’d been the awkward youth who’d courted her despite knowing it was forbidden. He was the exuberant husband who had always returned to her from the war with a smile and burning kiss; the man who’d called their babies a blessing despite what it could have cost them. This was the man who loved her to the point of obsession, much the way she’d come to love him.

Dinner was an uneventful affair, the anticipation of their departure lending her strength to smile and, for the first time in months, something to really look forward to.

Later, while sitting in the main room and nursing their drinks, Anakin reached out to her and Padmé went willingly, curling up with him on the sofa. She curled her legs over his and placed her head on his shoulder with a sigh. “This feels like a dream, Anakin.”

“Which part?”

“Being here, with you, like this.”

“I’ve always wanted you here with me like this,” he told her softly, his lips brushing her forehead as he turned his head to kiss her hairline. “The only thing that would make it better would be having Luke and Leia here.”

Her heart squeezed. “It would.”

“Soon, my love.” His arm tightened around her shoulder. “If... *when* we bring them home, we’ll need bigger quarters.”

Padmé blinked; she'd been so preoccupied with simply *finding* Luke and Leia, she'd not given much thought to the logistics once she had them back. Initially, she'd always thought that they'd sleep with her, but Anakin was right. The twins were older now and would need space of their own. "Their own room?" her heart squeezed and she curled closer to him. "I... I don't know if I'm comfortable with that, Ani. We'll have just got them back—"

"They won't be the only ones who just got their mother back, Padmé," he told her with a soft laugh. "I hardly want to give up being able to make love to you just to keep them in our room."

A blush crawled up her neck as Anakin nuzzled her forehead, pressing gentle kisses to her temple. "Anakin—"

"Tell me you can't give that up either, Padmé," he coaxed her by tracing his fingers down the column of her neck, stroking her pulse point deliberately, his voice low and husky, "tell me you want to be able to make love with me even after we get them back. To be a true family; to love in all the ways we can."

"Anakin..."

"Tell me," he urged, his lips sliding down from her temple and over her cheekbone, stopping at the edge of her lips and dipping the tip of his tongue into the indent he found there. "Tell me, Padmé..."

"I..." she moaned softly, his other hand coming to rest on her stomach, his thumb grazing the underside of her breasts with delicious, but near-innocent, friction. He withdrew when she turned her head, trying to kiss him, not letting her. "Anakin..."

"Tell me that you don't want me to touch you..."

"I..." her hand covered his on her stomach and she drew it upwards, or tried to, only to have him resist, keeping his hand where it was.

"Tell me, Padmé."

His touch, his resistance was maddening, especially in context. Padmé had gone without him as long as she'd been without her children and was greedy enough in that moment to want both. Greedy enough to believe that it was possible. "Anakin... Ani, please..."

"Tell me." He breathed against her lips and she could feel him, so close and yet so frustratingly far as he wheedled for what he wanted.

And Padmé gave it to him. "I want it all," her eyes fluttered open to lock with the electric blue of his, his face so close his nose was almost touching hers.

"Everything?"

"Everything."

"Then..." he smiled faintly, rubbing the tip of his nose against hers as his eyes began to sparkle, "we're going to need bigger quarters."

Padmé blinked as he pulled back instead of kissing her. Belated understanding of his comment hit her as he tucked her head against his shoulder and simply hugged her. A soft

laugh rose in her throat as she could practically *feel* his satisfaction. “You still don’t play fair, Anakin.”

“I never do when it’s important,” he agreed, kissing the crown of her head as he pulled her firmly onto his lap. “We should get some sleep. The next few days are going to be stressful.”

“A good stressful.”

“Padmé...” he hesitated, wrapping her firmly in his embrace. “This lead could be another dead end.”

“And it might not be.”

“There is a better chance it is. As much as I love seeing you so excited, you shouldn’t get your hopes up.”

There was silence between them for a long time as Padmé considered his words, feeling safe in the circle of his arms, staring at nothing. Anakin was right; there was a better chance of this lead being false than not. With the breadth of the galaxy, finding two small children, especially human twins, was highly unlikely. “I know,” she finally said at length, her words soft. “I know I shouldn’t, Anakin, but I just... for a lead to come to you, it has to be credible, right?”

“True.”

“Can... I just hope for tonight? Can I pretend that, when we get to wherever we’re going, Luke and Leia will be waiting for us there? Just tonight?”

Anakin’s hold on her tightened and she felt him sigh. “For tonight then, my love. For tonight, let us pretend that Luke and Leia will be waiting for us; that we’ll finally get to meet our children and be a family. The family we always wanted to be.”

“And that we’ll take them back to Naboo?”

“If that’s your wish.” There was a smile she couldn’t see in his voice. “To the lake house and the room we can redo from a baby’s room to a toddler’s.”

Padmé closed her eyes again, listening to Anakin’s voice as he painted a picture of what they would do when Luke and Leia rejoined them, and let herself fall into the fantasy. For tonight, she would enjoy the idea of reunion, of reconciliation. She basked in the thought of having her family together once more, in the dream of being just another pair of parents. Of laughing, loving and raising their children.

And as she basked, the fantasy found its way into her dreams... and, held safely in Anakin’s arms, Padmé slept, secure in that fantasy, until morning came to steal it away.

Month Twenty Five, Day 25 to 28 PEF

Chapter 81

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Five, Day Twenty five PEF

Reality had asserted itself after a night of fantasy in Anakin's arms, leaving Padmé little more to do than plan for one of two things. Either she and Anakin were going to find their children, which she hoped with all her heart was true, or they were potentially taking a holiday. Where, she wasn't sure.

The last five days had been filled with back and forth discussions to prepare for each eventuality. Anakin had made her pack two bags, one for the eventuality of a holiday and one for the eventuality of finding the twins. Planning had taken up her days and, before she'd realized it, Anakin had announced they'd come out of hyperspace near their destination. A destination that he *still* hadn't told her the name of.

Now that they were close, so close, Padmé was no longer anticipatory, but nervous. She twisted her hands together within the cloak she was wearing to aid in her disguise, the troopers who guarded her doors on the *Exactor* her escort as they walked to the hangar bay. Her children were potentially at the end of this journey; would they recognize her, despite the fact they'd not seen her in years? Would she recognize them — would they look like the holo that Anakin had extrapolated or would they look different?

Fears and uncertainty dogged her steps as she followed Commander Grange, suddenly yearning for Threepio's incessant chatter. But Threepio had gone on ahead and Artoo was with Anakin, leaving her with just the Commander and his men as they made their way to the turbolift.

The hallways between Anakin's quarters and the lift were eerily vacant, almost as if they were the only people on board the cruiser. Which, to Padmé's way of thinking, was ridiculous. Had Anakin deliberately cleared the corridors for her trip to the hanger bay? Probably; she wouldn't put anything past him when making plans for her safety.

"Lady Vader?"

Padmé tried not to flinch; no matter how many times she asked, they never changed her title. "Yes?"

"The turbolift is here."

She looked forward to find the other two members of her escort was already inside, just the Commander still waiting patiently with his hand on the doors to ensure they didn't close. Stepping inside, Padmé offered a soft apology as the doors closed. "Apologies, Commander. I'm a little... distracted."

The Commander nodded his head to her but said nothing, taking up a stance before her in the lift. Blocking her, she knew, from any eyes that might look in from the outside as they sped towards the hangar bay. The lift stopped twice on the way down, answering calls from

other floors, and Commander Grange immediately prevented anyone from stepping inside with them with a wave of his hand and a curt, “Lord Vader’s orders.”

Padmé, preoccupied with the twisting, churning clench of her gut, paid him little mind. How they got to the hanger bay was of little consequence to her, just that they got there. She wanted to arrive without issue, board the shuttle, or whatever craft Anakin had procured for them, and get to where her children potentially waited. Now that the time was potentially here, her excitement rivaled her nerves and it took all her self control to step calmly off the turbolift behind the Commander and walk evenly towards the hanger bay.

The moment she’d been working so hard for since waking from her coma and finding Luke and Leia gone was suddenly at hand; part of her felt a little like a Nexu chasing its tail — only to have caught it and suddenly didn’t know what to do about it. Maybe. Swallowing hard as they neared the flight deck, Padmé wiped suddenly sweaty palms on the insides of her sleeves. There was no guarantee that the children she and Anakin were about to meet were *their* children, and she tempered her eagerness with logic. Or tried to. Her mother’s heart didn’t want to listen and jumped frantically in her chest.

They entered an eerily quiet flight deck, affirming Padmé’s suspicion that Anakin had cleared her path, and looked beyond the Commander towards a shuttle sitting several meters away. Sure enough, Commander Grange led her right to it just as Anakin was descending the ramp.

The Commander stopped and snapped into a salute. “Lord Vader,”

“Thank you, Commander; your dismissed.” Anakin returned the salute as the Commander and his guard turned to go. Anakin’s gaze met hers. “Are you ready, Padmé?”

Unable to find her voice, she nodded. How could he look so collected when they were on the cusp of potentially finding their children? Anakin seemed to sense her thoughts and smiled faintly, if a little tightly. “This isn’t the first time I’ve been called to meet children, Padmé. I’ll reserve judgement until I lay my eyes on them.”

She swallowed hard, feeling his cynicism dampening a little of her anxiety, but also some of her anticipation. Anakin had been searching for their children, had *met* children that weren’t theirs... something she’d never done. For all she’d searched for Luke and Leia, she’d never truly come close to finding them. What if Anakin had found them before her? Even as that thought crossed her mind, she banished it. It didn’t matter; he *hadn’t* found them yet and now they were searching together. A search that could, very well, be ending today.

“Don’t dwell, my love.” Anakin stepped close to her, forcing her to look up at him and the smile that hadn’t yet left his face. “We’ll know soon enough.”

“What if it’s not them, Ani?”

“Then it’s not them and we continue our search,” he almost sounded callous and indifferent, but Padmé could hear the strain in his voice. Anakin was hoping the children they were going to see were Luke and Leia just as much as she was. “Come on, Padmé; we’ve come as close we can in the destroyer. We’ve a series of short jumps to make to get to our destination.”

“Which is... *where*, exactly?”

“Not here.” Anakin drew her up the ramp of the shuttle, activating the ramp controls as he did, his reply deliberately vague to her ear.

“Anakin.”

He slanted her a roguish grin. “It’s a planet without a name, Padmé. Finding it, I’m told, wasn’t easy.”

Which, to her way of thinking, only made the chance of the twins being *theirs* higher. Bail and Mon Mothma wouldn’t have hidden them away in any place that was easy to find. Pulling her hood back, Padmé was suddenly catapulted back to the days of their courtship; the layout of the shuttle was reminiscence of a Nabooian cruiser. Artoo, she could see, was plugged into the nava computer, and the little droid toodled a greeting.

Anakin settled at the controls and glanced her way as his hands flew across the panels. “There’s a closet to your left if you want to hang your robe.”

Which she did. Padmé took the opportunity to do just that before finding her way to the copilot seat. She kept her hands in her lap as she examined the controls, noting that they were very similar to her old cruiser’s. Glancing at Anakin, who was checking and rechecking their pre-flight, she couldn’t help but wonder if his choice of ship and its internal resemblance to the ships of her homeworld was deliberate. Some of her best memories had been made on ships like these with Anakin and while she hadn’t checked the doors in the corridor leading to the cockpit, she was willing to bet each led to a space similar to what she remembered.

“Nice ship.”

“Artoo and I remodeled,” he admitted without looking up from his task as the engines spooled up. “We both wanted a piece of home.”

Home. “So this is what you think of when you think of home?”

Anakin did pause, looking up at her, his expression solemn and unexpectedly serious. “I thought I’d lost you, Padmé. You’ve always been my home. With you gone...”

Artoo toodled a mournful sound but Padmé didn’t look his way, mesmerized by the honesty in Anakin’s gaze; the raw echo of agony. “With me gone, you chose my ship?”

“*Our* ship,” he countered, his gaze lingering for a moment before he turned back to the controls. “Some of our best memories were made here.”

Padmé couldn’t deny that and instead looked at the control again. “What can I do?”

“Fuel balance?”

She glanced at it. “In the green.”

“Landing gear?”

“Green.”

Anakin included her in the rest of the pre-flight checklist, cutting down their departure time significantly. Five minutes later, Anakin was calling the tower for clearance.

“Tower, this is the *Angle of Iego*, requesting departure clearance.”

Anakin's voice was almost teasing, and Padmé didn't miss the look he shot her way. *Angel of Iego* indeed!

"Angel of Iego, this is Tower. You're cleared for departure pending a status check."

"Status is five by five, Tower," Anakin came back easily, reaching for the thruster controls and taking the shuttle off the deck with practiced motions. "Departure confirmed."

"Happy hunting, sir."

Anakin flipped off the comm. as the *Angel of Iego* sped from the hangar bay, dipping down below the lips and into the blackness of space, leaving the *Executor* behind them. He twisted the ship, testing the controls as he sent her in a series of zigzagging motions followed by a lazy roll away from the Stardestroyer.

Padmé checked the sensors, wondering if he was responding to a threat only to see that there was nothing out here besides stars. No planets. No ships. No threats of any kind; just dead space. "Ani?"

Leveling out, Anakin brought them around, checking his heading with a faint half smile. "Sorry; I haven't flown her in a while."

"What do you usually fly?"

"My fighter," he flipped a few switches as Artoo toodled a series of instructions, Anakin reacting to them by bringing the ship about on a new heading. "Got it Artoo. Six five seven point four. Have you calculated the first jump?"

The astromech answered with a rather rude noise that had Padmé smothering a chuckle. Watching their interactions, she relaxed in her seat and enjoyed the show. Anakin and Artoo had always been amusing, right from the start when he'd been a little boy. Now, with the depth of the relationship between the man and his droid, she was gratified to see that her gift to him had become a true friend. Still, she couldn't resist teasing them both as Anakin touched the control that sent them into hyperspace.

"You know, memory wipes will fix that little personality glitch."

Artoo's indignant squawk crossed Anakin's indignant "Sacrilege!", both turning to look at her with what she could only describe as disgust.

Unrepentant, Padmé arched her eyebrows innocently at them. "No?"

"Never," Anakin agreed, glancing at his droid. "Isn't that right buddy?"

The affirmative toodle made Padmé chuckle despite the knot in her belly. "Not even once, Anakin?"

"Artoo has always been of more use to me without it," Anakin admitted, setting the auto pilot and alarms before he turned away from the console. "It made him a valuable hostage during the Clone War, but the risk of his potential capture always seemed worth taking to keep him as he is."

A complex series of sounds from the droid in question had Padmé arching her eyebrows. "I didn't catch that."

“A very... long winded agreement.” Anakin pushed up from his seat and held his hand out to her. “Come one. I’ll show you around.”

***Angel of Iego* — Month Twenty Five, Day Twenty six PEF**

Anakin’s estimation of several jumps, turned out to be a series of micro jumps that Artoo was plotting manually the moment the *Angel* exited hyperspace. Not once, from what Padmé could tell, did they enter an inhabited system. No planets ever showed outside the viewports, just junk and debris, the odd ship making a similar stop, only to disappear to hyperspace before long. Even now they were in hyperspace, the fifth micro jump so far out of who knew how many.

Padmé ran her hand over the pilot’s console as she say in the seat, Anakin in the ’fresher taking a shower, and leaving her some time to think.

Anakin and Artoo had outdone themselves. Whatever the ship had been before, and from the outside it didn’t look like much, the retrofit of the inside — and undoubtedly the engines and main systems — was mind boggling. Anakin had shown her the subtle changes they’d had to make thanks to space constraints, but Padmé didn’t find them too jarring. Mostly, it had been turned into a Nabooian cruiser, designed to house a small group but not a royal one. With no throne room and no droid compartment at the rear, and the corridor to the nose dramatically shortened, the space felt more homey; perfect for a holiday... or a small family.

Anakin, she realized as she looked around, might not have intended for his ship as the one that would search for their children, but it was a fitting one should they be found.

Checking her chrono, Padmé sighed. They had two more jumps to go before they’d reach their destination. Jumps that were dangerous, according to Artoo; jumps that a destroyer like the *Exactor* couldn’t risk making without a very, very good reason. Luke and Leia were reason enough for Padmé, but she knew they weren’t reason enough for Anakin to risk the lives of all the men on the destroyer. Not to mention, if he’d disclosed what he was searching for, which he’d assured her he hadn’t, the Emperor was likely to take notice and an interest.

The absolute *last* thing Padmé wished for was to end up on that evil man’s radar.

“Enjoying the view?”

“There’s not much to see,” she spun in her chair to find her husband rubbing a towel against his hair in the entrance to the cockpit. “But I think my view just improved.”

“You *think*?”

“There are things that could make it better.” Turning away, she looked out the viewport again and changed the subject to her true train of thought. “I thought you said these were micro-jumps, Ani.”

“They are. They need to be calculated down to the hundredth decimal — which is why Artoo is handling the jumps; they’re very dangerous.”

“So you said. Isn’t there a more direct route?”

“Not where we’re going.” Anakin stepped up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulder, squeezing them firmly. “Soon, my love. We’ll be there soon.”

“Today?”

“Maybe, if the transit points aren’t too busy. Early tomorrow if they are.”

“The suspense is killing me, Anakin; I thought we were almost there when we left the *Exactor*.”

“Flying through hyperspace isn’t like riding the shaak on Naboo, Padmé. You know that as well as I do.”

“I know,” Padmé sighed, tilting her shoulders as Anakin began to rub them, digging his fingers into the knots he found there. “I just wish there was a way to speed this up. The suspense is making me sick.”

“Anything I can help with?”

Glancing over her shoulder, she smiled faintly at him, knowing he’d see the strain in it even if she tried to hide it. “You are.”

Anakin continued to massage her shoulders for several minutes, loosening the muscles with deliberate pressure and Padmé’s head fell back against the seat as he did, her eyes closing as she practically purred under his touch. His hands were still moving when he spoke again. “Have you ever been this close, Padmé?”

“N—” Her eyes still closed, the unexpected prick of tears had her clearing her throat. “No. I heard rumors, but always arrived late. This is the first *real* lead where I might find them at the other end.”

“We,” he admonished softly. “Where we might find them.”

“We,” she agreed softly. Sharing the burden with him was surprisingly easy with them alone on the ship with just Artoo. It felt like the days during the Clone Wars, as if they’d been catapulted back in time to when it had been just the two of them, the ship he’d replicated one where they’d spent many hours. It might have been, she reflected suddenly, where the twins had been conceived. Until now, she’d never considered the *where*, just the *when*.

Silence reigned between them again as Anakin continued to rub her shoulders before finally, with a final squeeze, simply lay them flat. Her eyes fluttered open as she tilted her head to lay it against his hand and they watched the starlines pass beyond the viewport. Anakin lifted his thumb and gently stroked her cheek.

“This reminds me of our trips to Naboo.”

Padmé smiled, having started to think of the same. Anakin had often accompanied her on her trips home, not just because he was a known figure on her home planet, but because it was also where his robotic arm had been built and was serviced. Or so they’d claimed to ensure they had time together. Somehow, Anakin had managed to keep that fallacy through to the end of the war despite his own aptitude with mechanics and the Jedi council had believed him.

“I was just thinking the same,” she admitted, not looking at him as her gaze skimmed back down to the modifications in the cockpit. “I can’t believe what you did to this shuttle.”

“With you gone, there were fewer things that made me feel closer to you.” Anakin’s admission was followed by a squeeze of his hands, only to have them drop away from her a moment later. “Sitting here won’t make the time go any faster, Padmé. Artoo will handle the navigation from here; come.”

“Where are we going?”

He shot her a roguish grin as she turned to look at him, intrigued. “I’m going to try and take your mind off things for a while.”

“Anakin,” exasperation laced her tone, “I’m *not* in the mood.”

He laughed, reaching down to pull her out of the chair. “Just *what* do you think I had in mind?”

Unable to resist, she reached up to swipe an errant water droplet from his face. “What else?”

Anakin’s arm snaked around her waist and Padmé didn’t bother resisting as he drew her to him, touching his forehead to hers. “Much as I love making love to you, that *wasn’t* what I had in mind.”

“No?”

“No.” He hugged her briefly before letting her go. “Come on; I’ll show you.”

Reluctantly, Padmé allowed herself to be led from the cockpit, knowing that time would pass more swiftly if she let him distract her. No matter what he did, however, her focus was split. Too much was riding on the outcome of this upcoming meeting for her to relax completely.

Still, Anakin tried and for that distraction, she was grateful.

Angel of Iego — Month Twenty Five, Day Twenty eight PEF

“I don’t know if I’m ready for this, Ani.” Padmé twisted her hands in the sleeves of her cloak as he was setting the hood upon her head in the most effective way to hide her identity. “What if—”

“Stop.” He pressed his finger to her lips, tilting her head up to look at him, his thumb tracing the line of her jaw. “Don’t borrow trouble.”

“There’s just so much that could go wrong.”

“And a lot that could be right,” he countered, his expression grim as he continued. “My contact can’t see you; they mustn’t suspect anything about who you are or why you’re with me. Do you understand?”

“No.”

Anakin smiled faintly but it died quickly, his expression as serious as she’d ever seen it.

“Why can’t they know, Anakin?” Padmé couldn’t help herself. Few knew of her connection to Anakin anymore and most thought her dead. Surely her face wasn’t that well known anymore. “Nobody knows me anymore.”

As if echoing her thoughts, Anakin lifted his other hand to cup her face, tilting it to look into her eyes. “There are those who suspect you survived, Padmé; those who would do anything to ensure you return to the land of the dead. I won’t have it. I refuse to let you go again. If you can’t stay hidden, I can’t bring you with me; the danger to you would be too great.”

“If it means finding Luke and Leia—”

“Not even then.” Anakin touched his forehead to hers, looking deep into her eyes. “I would rather leave them where they are if it means losing you in exchange.”

Wrapping her hands around his wrists, she pressed forward and touched her lips to his in a soft apology. Her worry had gotten the better of her. She didn’t want to be the trade for the twins either; she wanted them back, *with* both of them and as a family. If staying hidden would ensure that wasn’t jeopardized, she’d do it. “I’m sorry; I’ll do as you ask and stay hidden, Anakin.”

“Good.” His lips touched hers for a long moment before he backed away and readjusted her hood. “Remember; not a word, no matter what you hear.”

She nodded and he turned away, leading to the ship’s exit and hitting the hatch release.

Padmé couldn’t help but note that he was dressed in black again; leather from neck to ankle, gleaming under the light of the moon as he led the way with ground eating strides down and out of the ship and to the edge of the make shift landing pad. His hood was down, his cape flowing behind him with every step; the image was so familiar her heart unexpectedly ached. Anakin was a man on a mission. Following behind him, she made sure her hood was in place, casting her features in complete shadow.

Wherever they were, it was a barren place, with storm clouds in the sky on the horizon. Padmé could see beyond Anakin to a housing complex which appeared to be mounted on a slowly moving refinery. It was only then she notice that the ground on which she stood was metal and not earth, a faint lurching motion forcing her to balance on the balls of her feet. Moving refineries. Turning, she found herself looking up towards a housing complex mounted behind her to the back of the refinery.

She’d been stranger places.

And if this place was where they found Luke and Leia at long last, she wasn’t going to judge. Still, if Mon Mothma and Bail had abandoned her children *here*, her former friends would have a lot of answer for.

Anakin was waiting for her and Padmé stopped her examination of the planet, moving to fall into step just behind him as she’d been instructed. They moved quickly from there, stepping off the platform and away from the main housing complex. Anakin led her towards a smaller series of buildings where a figure seemed to be waiting for them. As they neared, the figure moved, coming in their direction, and confirming her suspicions.

The hooded figure had a long snout and black, bug-like eyes and it took her a moment to place his species as Kubaz. She’d never met one and knew of them only by reputation. Generally, they wore goggles to prevent damage to their sensitive eyes, but the darkness of

this world seemed to suit the alien just fine. He stepped close to Anakin, speaking so low that Padmé couldn't hear of what they spoke.

A datastick was passed to Anakin along with another series of explanations — or so she assumed. The creature's snout was moving. Frustration at being excluded from the exchange was swift to rise, but Padmé held her tongue, struggling to remain patient as she repeated Anakin's warnings about the danger she was in to herself. Anakin slid the datastick into his datapad and examined the information. His shoulders tightened; Padmé saw it unmistakably. Anakin pulled a credit chit from his belt and passed it to the alien with a low comment and a wave of his hand — a clear dismissal.

The Kubaz spared her only the briefest of glances before stepping away, turning and disappearing back towards the landing port.

Anakin met her gaze, the tension in his face triggering her own; this was it. Whatever he'd been told, whatever he'd been given, it was viable and they were going to do this. Anakin waved her forward to join him, turning the datapad her way so she could see what he'd paid for. The details under the top series of numbers took her breath away.

Two human children.

Born on the first Empire Day

One male. One female.

Blonde hair.

Blue eyes.

Not living with their biological parents.

Delivered to the colony under mysterious circumstances.

Padmé clutched Anakin's hand where it held the datapad, her eyes blurring as her breathing suddenly seemed to be too difficult for her lungs.

"Breathe, Padmé." Anakin's low admonishment had her gasping for breath as he gripped her hand on his with his free hand. "Don't pass out now."

"Never." she replied on a gasp. If the details on the datapad were right, there was a very good chance she was about to be reunited with her children; that her family was about to be whole again. Fainting would only delay it and that was the last thing she wanted. As terrified as she was now that the moment was at hand, elation filled her. "Where...?"

Anakin looked at her for a long moment, his own strain visible to her eyes; he was just as anxious and excited as she was. "Are you—"

"Where do we go?"

He seemed to be assessing her ability to continue and Padmé took a deep breath and then another, clearing the dark spots from the edges of her vision. It took a long moment but Anakin finally nodded and motioned for her to follow him as he stepped into a maze of streets and junctions.

"This way."

Month Twenty Five, Day 28 PEF

Chapter 82

Refinery Planet — Month Twenty Five, Day Twenty eight PEF

Padmé followed Anakin through the small buildings on the moving refinery with trepidation. Her palms were sweating, her whole body was shaking, vibrating, with the knowledge that her children might be through any door they saw. They were so *close*. If the data Anakin's informant had provided was accurate, this was probably the closest she'd ever been and, while she'd been searching for them for so long, Padmé was starting to realize that a part of her had come to believe she'd never be able to find them.

She simply hadn't had the resources.

Anakin finally stopped at a building that looked just like any other. He checked the datapad with the information he'd been given and then tucked it away. His gaze met hers as he turned to look at her. "Ready?"

"Never more so."

He hesitated. "It... might not be them, Padmé."

"But it *could* be, too. We won't know if we just stand here."

He nodded and turned back to the door. Padmé watched him examine the door and realized after a moment there were no toggles or bells, no buttons or control panels to announce themselves. From the side, she saw his lips quirk into a hastily disappearing half-smile as he shook his head and lifted his hand to knock. "How primitive."

The inappropriate nervous giggle that welled in her throat was quelled just as quickly as it formed and Padmé twisted her and together in her sleeves as she waited for the door to be answered. They waited for two minutes before Anakin looked at her. "Maybe they're not home?"

"Maybe they didn't hear me," he returned easily and switched hands, rapping his leather encased metal knuckles against the portal. It took another minute before the sound of metal scraping on metal from the other side sounded and the door opened a series of inches.

"Yes?"

"I'm told you have two human children at this address who are not yours."

"We have a lot of children who are not ours," replied a nasally voice and Padmé found she couldn't place it; the inflections the creature was using were unfamiliar and new. Whatever the caretaker's race, she felt a sudden gnawing of unease in her gut. Chill bumps rose on her skin as it continued. "There are many unwanted and orphaned children; be more specific."

Anakin's hand touched the door, flattening out so it was fully touching, and Padmé found, in the new position, she couldn't see his face.

"I *suggest* that you let us meet them," there was something in his tone that was almost caressing and Padmé realized he was using the Force to try and persuade the caretaker to let them in. It was a dangerous move, with Jedi still being hunted, if the caretaker realized what was happening. Still, Anakin seemed determined as he continued and Padmé conceded that if it brought their children into her arms, it was worth the risk. "We are looking for specific children and will not take much of your time."

Please, please let this work, she prayed silently. This was the closest she'd ever been to potentially finding Luke and Leia and if they were turned away on the cusp, Padmé wouldn't be held responsible for her actions. Caretaker or not, this alien wasn't going to stand between her and her children.

Whatever Anakin was doing seemed to have persuaded the creature and the door opened further. "The children are sleeping; do not disturb them."

"We'll be quiet."

There was a pause, as if their host was assessing them. And then—

"This way."

Anakin glanced back at her with a blank expression and motioned for her to follow him. They entered the dimly lit dwelling and were brought to a staircase which extended both up and down. It wasn't until they reached the stairs that Padmé got a good look at their host... and her gut clenched.

The creature had pale skin with black hair and appeared to be human. The strange slits on its face, which appeared to be bulging with something, gave her pause in identifying it as human. Its eyes were almost amber and mesmerizing, as if trying to convince her of its harmless nature.

All the same, the hair on the back of her neck rose as its eyes met hers and her instincts were shouting at her to flee. Looking at the caretaker, she couldn't figure out why her reaction was so visceral. Her hand grasped Anakin's elbow and squeezed, drawing his gaze around to hers. They shared a look and he nodded almost imperceptibly.

He felt it too.

After a long moment, the caretaker stepped onto the stairs and headed down. "This way."

Following cautiously, Anakin stepped ahead of her, reaching down to squeeze her hand and, as he let go, tap the small blaster she'd hidden in her sleeve. If nothing else, they'd be ready should something go sideways and his warning was clear; their mission couldn't distract them from the potential danger lurking in their unexpected host.

The warning well received, Padmé slipped her hands back into her sleeves, closing her fingers around the stock of the small blaster before following Anakin and their host down the stairs. The darkness was lit faintly by recessed lighting fixtures that only seemed to be on partial power... or running out of power. Shadows flickered before her as they descended Anakin staying between her and their host the whole way.

After a minute of descending, the landing came into view around Anakin's broad shoulders, no better lit than the staircase they'd just descended. It was quiet, only the sound of their footsteps echoing back to her. Without waiting for her to step off the last steps, their host led them down a passage to the left, two other similar passage, right and behind her, as badly lit as the rest of the place.

Light sensitive? Padmé considered this as they passed several closed doors, the whole thing reminding her of a prison, and she shuddered involuntarily, for the first time finding herself hoping the children here weren't hers. The thought of Luke and Leia being raised by this emotionless and creepy individual in their equally creepy home made her heart squeeze painfully.

The rooms they'd passed through had no toys, no signs that children lived here at all. At best, this orphanage seems to be overtaxed and underfunded. Like most of their kind. It didn't make the idea that her children might have spent the first two years of their lives here any easier.

They finally stopped before a door that looked like any other and their host opened it; Padmé was relieve to see it wasn't locked. At least the children, hers or not, were not being treated like prisoners. Anakin glanced her way. "Stay here."

"But-!"

Anakin's look was full of grim warning before he stepped into the room.

Padmé spared a glance at their host, her fingers circling more tightly around the blaster stock. It was watching her with its amber gaze, half lidded and assessing; like a predator evaluating its prey. It was a feeling she well remembered from her time in the Geonosian arena when facing the Nexu. The hairs on the back of her neck rose as its amber gaze caught and held hers as if trying to convince her that her instincts were wrong. Padmé had lived too long and through too many hardships to disregard her gut. Taking a step back, she kept her hand in her sleeve, but pulled the blaster from its pocket.

Her line of sight to the creature was broken when Anakin stepped out of the room. "It's not them."

With a cry of disbelief, Padmé was around him and in the room a heartbeat later, his Jedi reflexes no match for her desperation.

Two small bodies, both with dirty, pale hair, lay on makeshift bunks near the door. She went to her knees, reaching trembling hands towards them as their little chests rose and fell in sleep. Even as she did, catching a glimpse of both their faces, Padmé knew Anakin was right. The children were the right age, the right profile, the right everything... except the little girl's skin was tinted green... and the boy's red. In a holo, those were details which had failed to come through.

Her breath choked back, nearly suffocating her, relief and regret tearing through her in equal measure. Luke and Leia weren't being subjected to this establishment... but Luke and Leia were still lost.

Pushing to her feet, Padmé fled the room, darting past Anakin and their host, running up the stairs and for the door as the despair threatened to choke her again. Anakin was close on

her heels, catching her on the upper landing and stopping her as she made for the door. “I know.” He told her softly.

It was all it took for the reminder that this wasn’t his first disappointment, and Padmé buried her face against his chest with a great, heaving sob.

“I am sorry to see your wife so upset.”

Padmé stiffened, biting her lip and choking back her disappointment as the words of their host, its voice, kicked her self preservation instincts back into overdrive. “We need to leave.”

Anakin’s arms tightened around her, showing he’d heard her barely whispered comment. He didn’t address her when he spoke, though. “Thank you for your time; I hope you find their parents.”

Their host remained surprisingly silent as they took their leave, Anakin following her out of the building and not allowing her to speak with the creature. Which suited Padmé just fine; she had no desire to converse with a creature that seemed to view them as some kind of prey. Or snack. What of the children in its home?

They were several blocks away before she spoke up. “The children aren’t safe under that creature’s care.”

“Not here.” He cast a look at her over his shoulder. “We can talk when we get back to the ship.”

With a hard swallow, Padmé held her tongue. The unspoken message was clear; for all they’d left the house behind, they weren’t out of danger yet. Readjusting her grip on the blaster, she scanned their surroundings, knowing Anakin was doing the same, but not just with his eyes. His senses would be alert for danger too. It was remarkably like the other times they’d been on missions together and, despite the circumstance, she found a grudging smile crossing her lips.

“Something funny?”

“Memories,” was all she gave him in return, keeping her gaze beyond him. They could talk about that when they got back to this ship too.

They were just nearing the spaceport when Anakin suddenly whirled, “Behind you!”

Pame spun, the blaster coming out of her sleeve just as a creature that looked like the host at the orphanage, was sent forcibly back by the wave of Anakin’s hand. The creature braced itself, coming up on the balls of its feet, one hand planted on the ground for balance, its amber eyes flashing hungrily as they fixated beyond her, on Anakin. Padmé suddenly understood and shot off a bolt only to have it dodged as the creature jumped away, behind a nearby building.

“Force eaters!”

“Among other things,” Anakin agreed, almost lazily, “Get to the ship.”

“It’s not after me!”

"It will be if it gets through me," Anakin unclipped his lightsaber from his belt. "Go, Padmé!"

"I can help, Anakin!"

"Get the ship in the air and come get me," he told her grimly, turning to face the creature as it stepped out from behind the building, a pair of proboscis that hadn't been previously visible extending from the pouches on its face. "Go!"

Padmé went.

The sound of a lightsaber igniting, followed by the familiar buzz of an energy staff, made her run harder. In her mind's eye, she could see Anakin facing off against the creature, his lightsaber blazing with a brilliant blue light, weaving before him in a defensive pattern. Even though she well knew his prowess with a lightsaber, Anakin had asked for her to help him in this and she wasn't about to fail.

Darting quickly across the area and into the spaceport, she sprinted for the ship, cursing each delay, each corner that looked identical to the last, each door that didn't open fast enough.

Squeezing through door after door, she finally reached the ship and, instead of waiting for the ramp to descend, took the emergency ladder straight into the bowels. The hatch took some doing and in her mind's eye she could see Anakin whirling across the field of battle, facing down an enemy that wanted him as dead as any droid had during the war. The hatch caught and stuck, grinding to a halt. Gritting her teeth, Padmé put all of her strength into the turning of the handles.

They creaked and groaned, the gears finally giving way.

Scrambling up the ladder, Padmé was quickly in the ship's small entry bay; she'd give Anakin hell later for not up-keeping the hatch. Securing it back in place, she sprinted for the cockpit, not feeling the burn in her lungs or the ragged edge to her breathing.

"Mistress Padmé! Mistress Padmé!"

She crashed into a wall as Threepio appeared before her suddenly, forcing her to stop lest she topple them both.

"But-!"

"Move, Threepio!" Her snapped command shut him up and, without regard for whatever he was trying to tell her, Padmé flung herself around the golden obstacle, slamming into the opposite wall as she made the entrance of the cockpit. Her hands danced with furious intent over the console as she brought the ship out of hibernation, silently cursing the speed of the ship's systems even as she was counting the time in her head. Anakin needed her. *Now.*

"Artoo!"

The little droid toodled an inquiry from somewhere behind her, his response muffled.

"Get up here, Artoo!" Without looking away from the consoles, she stretched for the release on the grav locks holding the ship to the platform. Every second the ship took to prime was a second more that Anakin had to fight the Force eater. She'd heard stories of them and

suddenly wished that they'd remained there. Jedi or Force adepts were their favorite prey and their abilities supposedly rivaled those they liked to hunt.

Artoo zipped into the cockpit and went straight to the dataport, the systems she hadn't yet brought online spooling up quickly.

"By-pass what you have to, Artoo, but get me those thrusters!"

There was no acknowledgement from the astromech, however, the indicator light for the thrusters began to blink from red to orange, speeding up as other sub-systems flashed offline. Confident Artoo was doing what she'd asked, Padmé spooled up the override for the landing ramp, knowing she'd have to lower it in flight, one eye on the thruster indicator light.

Not bothering with the crash webbing, Padmé put her hands on the controls and launched the ship from the landing pad. She banked sharply, nearly unseating herself even as she heard Threepio let out a dismayed wail, his metallic body hitting a wall somewhere in the hall behind her. Paying him no attention, Padmé turned the ship in the direction where she'd left Anakin and stabbed the controls to lower the ramp, feeling a stab of nostalgia as she pictured the last time she'd seen this maneuver done. Back when she'd been a girl of fourteen, Jedi had been sent to protect her and their unscheduled stop had brought her in contact with a boy who would change the face and shape of the Galaxy.

An alarm blared, indicating an error with the ramp and Padmé cursed. "Artoo, take over!"

She didn't wait for the droid to acknowledge her before she was careening back into the hall, headed for the manual controls for the ramp. She wouldn't be able to see what was happening, but the astromech had been with Anakin through many a difficult situation and she trusted the droid to take care of them both. The controls were tucked into a corner she was forced to squeeze into, focused solely on the manual controls along the far side of the alcove. Wedging herself in, Padmé grasped the controls and began to push.

The intercom on the ship blazed to life and Anakin's voice came across it.

"*Open the ramp, Padmé.*" He sounded slightly breathless, almost exhilarated. Some things just didn't change; Anakin had always thrived on dangerous situations.

"I'm trying! The controls are stuck!" The sound of a lightsaber and a force staff striking one another hummed in the background of his transmission and she heard him grunt. "Anakin!"

"*Get that door open!*"

Unwilling to risk a loss of his concentration, Padmé, tucked her legs against the wall and used her whole weight against the lever. There was a whining grinding noise and she gritted her teeth, not letting up on the pressure against the lever. Had she not been wedged into the small space, she would have stumbled forward as the controls suddenly began to move smoothly, jamming her fingers against the wall as it slammed into the open position. The pain didn't register even as the wind began to whip through the halls of the small ship. "It's open, Anakin!"

"*I see it!*"

A flurry of lightsaber sounds echoed around her as she struggled to extricate herself from the small space. Then, wind and silence. *No!*

The lever at the far wall suddenly flipped back, slammed into the closed and locked position as the ramp retracted with a crunching sound. Anakin was suddenly there, pulling her from her prison even as he raised his voice to be heard in the cockpit.

“Artoo; *go!*”

The ship rocketed towards space as Anakin steadied her, his hands on her waist. His hair was windswept, his expression holding a thrill for her she hadn’t felt in a long time. He was breathing slightly more rapidly, as if he’d been given a good workout, a faint sheen of perspiration on his skin even as his eye practically glowed a blue-white color. It was all she saw before his mouth was on hers, the conquer returning to his conquest. A celebration of having escaped death and reveling in his continued survival.

Padmé didn’t fight him. Relief brought her to him willingly, her hands sliding into his hair as she arched into his body, kissing him back just as passionately.

Almost as quickly as the kiss had started, it ended, with Anakin straightening on a ragged breath. “If you always kiss me like that when I return from danger, I just might have to take you out more often.”

“Why did you stay?” Slapping her hands against his chest, Padmé glared at him. “He could have killed you, Anakin!”

“At least he wouldn’t have gotten you.” Anakin’s eyes flashed with heat and determination. “I couldn’t bear it if you were taken from me again; if something happened to you.”

The unspoken agony of their separation, when he’d believed her dead, was heavy in his words, and Padmé had no response. He meant it; she could see it, *feel* it. She’d just had her own scare, realizing that she didn’t want to lose *him* again either and that was part of the problem. Her anger dissipate as quickly as it had come. “Ani... I don’t want to lose you either.”

Anakin’s touch was gentle as he cupped her face with a cocky, yet gentle, smile. “I can handle one Anzati, my love.”

Anzati.

Padmé shivered and not just from his touch; the name of the race of Force Eaters conjured stories in her mind of what they were capable of. Legends and myths, mostly, but none of them good. Especially when it came to Force users. “Will it come after us?”

“Not likely; they chose this place for a reason.” Anakin leaned down and kissed her again, this time gently, before letting her go. “Come on; we need to give Artoo a heading.”

Month Twenty Six, PEF

Chapter 83

Angel of Iego — Month Twenty Six, Day One PEF

The planet that appeared in the viewscreen as they dropped out of hyperspace was a lush blue and green, sparkling in the light of the nearby sun. It was a small planet, one that reminded her very much of her home planet of Naboo. It wasn't Naboo, however, and Padmé glanced at the coordinates only to frown when she found didn't recognize them. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere you've not likely heard of."

"Really, Anakin?" Padmé shot him an exasperated look. "Since when?"

The last two days had been tough on her; after the fight with the Anzati, Anakin had set their course and then proceeded to sleep for the next thirty hours. If she'd needed proof that the fight with the Force Eater had taken a great deal of his focus and energy, she didn't now. Anakin, however, did look better rested and she'd done what she could, without knowing their destination, to keep things on an even keel.

Artoo and Threepio had been a big help, as always.

"It's a small planet, my love," Anakin returned with a half-smile that was faintly sheepish. "I... stumbled upon it during one of my reconnaissance missions."

Meaning he crashed, Padmé thought wryly. "Wouldn't you have had to report it?"

"I *had* hoped to bring you here, a place where we could just be husband and wife..." his look was suggestive, "if I'd reported it, that would never have been possible."

"A place where..." Padmé trailed off, her eyes widening as the memory hit her with the impact of a blaster bolt. Anakin in her office as she'd been working on a proposal for the senate, suggesting that they take a trip to a place he knew, a place where they didn't have to be Jedi and Senator... just before he'd given her his lightsaber as a show of trust and affection. While she'd appreciated the gesture at the time, the rest of the day hadn't been so magical. "*This is where you wanted to take me?*"

"It's called Dandoran."

He was right; she wasn't familiar with it. "Dandoran."

"We're in hutt space," Anakin noted easily, "At least, it is now. It was still part of contested space back then."

And Anakin knew as much, if not more, about Hutts than she did. "And you have landing clearance."

“Not exactly,” he flashed her a smile, “where we’re going doesn’t have a spaceport.”

“Of course it doesn’t. Which is why you’re just going to land the *Angel* in someone’s back yard, right?”

His laughter at her semi-serious tease did nothing to put her fears to rest as he adjusted the controls with familiar ease and the ship banked towards the planet. “Why tell you anything when you clearly know me so well?”

***Trenwyth* — Month Twenty Six, Day Eight PEF**

Tracking someone who didn’t want to be found was one of Asajj’s Ventress’ specialties.

Jedi specifically, or rather, those that *had been* Jedi. Force users, especially ones with such moral codes, tended to make mistakes most underworld individuals wouldn’t. They fled to places which held the same codes, planets who favored rebellion and species who didn’t embrace the rule of the Emperor for his newly formed Galactic Empire. Aligning themselves with such lost causes practically painted a target on their back. Or had, for the last twenty six months since a bounty had been placed on their heads.

Those who hadn’t died swiftly, had learned to adapt; for the most part. Only the most skilled, the most cunning — or those with the most luck — had evaded the hands of the Emperor. Jedi were an easy prey; a worthy prey. A prey that *deserved* to be hunted and killed.

Slicers, however, were a different breed of prey and this particular one she had no real desire to bring to justice. She’d hunt him because she’d been assigned to do so, not because there was any love lost between them. In this case it was her or him. With no one else to look after her interests Asajj knew her choice was easy; she *always* chose herself. When Vader had re-tasked her to find Max, she’d delayed, taking her time to seek the Jedi she’d been assigned first. Managing to track two more of them, plus another pair of apprentices, she’d been deep into her last search, thankful to be hunting worthy and deserving prey; to be *away* from Vader and his self-denying wife. She’d been so *certain* he wouldn’t expect results... until a request for an update on her progress had been demanded not thirty six hours ago.

Now, with two new trophies and an unexpected clue to the slicer’s location, Asajj found herself maneuvering to land her shuttle on a rocky outcropping of the planet Trenwyth. With no industrial society to speak of, it was a primitive mid-rim planet and the last place she would have ever expected to search for such a talented slicer. Which was why, she reflected wryly, it made one of the best possible hideouts. Without technology as a temptation, he would be able to blend in with the locals and adapt to their way of life.

If there were locals.

Not much was known about Trenwyth and the only thing Asajj had been able to find in the records about the planet was that it was home to a parasitic worm that could infest happabore. Fortunately, happabore weren’t native to Trenwyth, they were simply farmed on the planet. Farmed and inoculated against the parasite, for all the good it did them. Why a reasonable sentient race insisted on farming the creatures in the one place they could be infected, was beyond her.

There was no formal spaceport, no settlements; no signs of civilization beyond a few isolated farm holds. It left her a *lot* of planet to search and, fortunately, lots of time to do it.

Max had been on the planet, from what she could determine, for the better part of the last twelve standard days; at least, he'd entered the system twelve days ago. She'd have to thoroughly search to be able to determine if he was still planet side. There was, however, no reason to doubt he wasn't. For a man with his talent of blending in, he'd unwittingly made a dangerous enemy when Padmé had enticed him into her bed. Part of her felt sorry for him even as part of her admired him.

When they'd last spoken on Bespin a galactic month and a half ago, and she'd urged him to disappear, he surprised her by taking her words to heart. Max had changed his name, falsifying his death and becoming Edoc Legule, tech specialist, upon leaving Cloud City. He'd "died" again on Nal Hutta, becoming Mefral Fabnu, bounty hunter; only he'd crossed the wrong Hutt and become memorable enough for her to pick up his trail. Mefral disappeared on Riflor and Kormar Edge had been born; a specialist in happabore genetics.

Which had led her to Trenwyth, the only logical place for someone of that specialty to disappear.

The landing gear engaged as she set her ship down in the clearing, using the scanners to search for lifeforms. Coming up negative in the area around her, Asajj ran quickly through the cool down process before locking out the console. Leaning back in her chair, she closed her eyes for a long moment, centering herself in the Force and finding the well of power that was never far from her fingertips. Determination rose up within her as she considered what she was going to need to do; what she had come to do.

To hunt.

To *capture*.

To set in motion the downfall of the two people she hated most in the entire galaxy.

To find her freedom and escape, once and for all.

Slowly exhaling, she opened her eyes and narrowed them on the viewport and the surrounding vegetation. Somewhere out there was a man who thought he'd run fast and far enough to avoid the long arm of Vader's reach. Somewhere out there was a dead man who hadn't yet realized he was living on borrowed time. Quashing the twinge of conscience for what needed to be done, Asajj felt the familiar tingle of the Force in her fingertips and pushed it away. This was a case of her or him and, no matter how much she might empathize with his plight, it wouldn't stop her from what needed to be done. Deliberately undoing her crash webbing, the ordered movements her way of settling her thoughts, she reached for her lightsabers and headed for the ship's ramp.

Let the hunt for Kormar Edge begin.

Dandoran — Month Twenty Six, Day Twelve PEF

"Mistress Padmé! Mistress Padmé!"

Padmé didn't even open her eyes as she sighed, tilting her head back against soft moss that covered her improvised recliner in the one space of the clearing where sunlight beamed for several hours a day. It was little more than a boulder, yet it was comfortable enough for sun bathing; it was a luxury she'd rediscovered in the last few days. Until Anakin had surprised her the night before with a full body massage for the third time in a week, she'd been waiting for something to go wrong.

Their paradise remained undisturbed and Anakin had taken away every potential way for it to be disturbed, focusing so intently on her well being, it was like being back on Naboo for their honeymoon. And, in a way, it was a second honeymoon. Anakin was attentive in ways he'd only been between missions during the clone wars. He was playful, smiled and laughed, teasing her with such fervor and intent, her sides had ached repeatedly from laughing. His energy was inexhaustible, so much so, that she'd begged for an hour to herself each day. Generously, he'd given her three.

One in the morning while he did his morning routine, and Padmé forewent her own hour in favor of watching his katas; watching him in nothing but a pair of pants as he went through the motions of his morning drills was something she'd never expected to witness again. It was a pleasure she no longer needed to deny herself and so she didn't and made no secret of it. If his additional flexing during his routines was any indication, he enjoyed having her watch him. He'd been trying to get her to join him and, one of these mornings, she was determined to do just that.

Just not yet.

At night, Anakin spent an hour watching her go through her nightly routine. She brushed her lengthening hair, went through a series of meditations and stretches. He usually joined her for the last, insisting on assisting her with certain positions... that generally led to a more vigorous workout before bed than she intended.

Still, she managed to get an hour to herself no matter which way she looked at it. Her hour in the afternoon was spent alone, lounging as she was on her new favorite boulder and enjoying the heat of natural sunlight. Generally she was undisturbed, unless one of the droids did it; like now.

"What is it, Threepio?"

"Your skin, my lady, it is starting to turn a most unsightly shade of red."

Padmé cracked an eyelid to look at the droid and a half-smile cracked her lips. "Really, Threepio? Unsightly?"

"Protocol dictates that proper protective cream should be worn at all times when exposed to dangerous solar radiation."

He sounded so affronted, Padmé did her best not to laugh. "It does, does it?"

"Why yes, Mistress, it is *most* clear. I have brought you some."

Opening both eyes, Padmé's gaze dropped to the arm outstretched towards her and slowly sat upright. "That's very thoughtful of you, Threepio; I wouldn't want to burn further, now would I?"

"I would think not! I understand it is *most* uncomfortable."

With a faint smile, she accepted the proffered tube of cream. "Thank you, Threepio."

"Of course my lady. If I may be of any other service, please do not hesitate to ask."

Watching him walk away, Padmé lifted her gaze to the villa, only to have it collide with Anakin's blue one. He smiled at her, lifting one hand in greeting, and then turned and disappeared back inside. She felt a tightening in her chest when he didn't approach her, didn't make to intrude on her time. Only, she realized suddenly as her gaze dropped back to the cream her hand, he *had*. He'd simply used Threepio to do it.

He'd taken no credit; wanted no recognition beyond an acknowledgement of his presence.

Anakin. She smiled faintly and unscrewed the cap, coating her fingers in the white cream. The sweet gesture went straight to her heart. She'd have to think of some way to properly repay his thoughtfulness later. And, no doubt, they would both enjoy it.

***Trenwyth* — Month Twenty Six, Day Twenty PEF**

Creeping forward to the edge of the precipice silently, Ventress was careful not to dislodge any rocks as she eased her head over to look down the sheer incline to the basin below. Faint, primitive fire light rebounded off the walls of the canyon, not reaching her hiding spot. The exact location of the fire wasn't visible from where she perched, yet from the angle at which she observed the clearing at the cliff base, it came from somewhere *within* the cliff side. A depression, hollow or cave would hide the breeders well, she knew, especially from the unpredictable weather patterns she'd observed since landing on the planet.

As far as assignments went, Asajj was finding the people easy enough to deal with — most herders were weak-minded folk — and the weather the one sore spot. Rain was common, with raging thunder and lightning storms which would routinely drive her into hiding. It had cut into her search time, causing delay after delay in her travel plans to get from one camp to the next.

Despite the delays and the difficulty finding the camps, she was closing in on her prey a little more every day.

Wrapping the Force around her like a blanket, Asajj slid forward, coming over the lip of the cliff face with her hands outstretched before her. The wind whipped at her clothes as she executed a flip about half way down the cliff and channeling the Force into her landing. Her feet had barely touched the ground before she was rolling into the dancing shadows. No one saw her for she made no noise and, the wind of her passing was little more than another regular phenomena of the planet's strange weather systems. Scanning the area before her, her lips twisted as she noted the pungent aromas which indicated the happabore were grazing nearby. Fortunately, they were docile creatures and only parasitic infections caused them to become dangerous.

There were three figures in the firelight, two with their backs to her as they stacked collected firewood along one wall while the third crouched at the flames, a cooking pot suspended above the dancing light. The trio were speaking and Asajj turned her ear to theirs,

searching for the familiar inflections of Kormar Edge's words. Inflections that, no matter what disguise he wore, always seemed to come through. Hard consonants with a bit of a catch on the ems.

After several long minutes of listening to their words, but not what they were saying, she cursed silently. None of these three spoke with his cadence or inflections. She could hear the distinct breathing of a Kel'dor, one human female and the inflections of an Ugnaught. Unless Kormar had donned the disguise of a Kel'dor, something Asajj considered but dismissed, none of the trio were her quarry. She listened to them from the safety of the shadows, searching for the datapad she knew they had been sharing. This part of Trenwyth has several ranches where the happabore were raised, only none of them had permanent settlements.

Asajj was looking for information; the safe havens, like this cave, that were stocked for the nomads.

None of the safe havens she'd come across to date had held any information. Surveying the groups who used them had led her to believe that each rancher and breeder had a map of the area and the designated shelters. If she could get her hands on it, locating her prey would be that much easier. Killing them was an option, but not one she entertained for long. Swift as it could be, it held the risk of alerting her prey to her presence if one of these traders were seeking his so-called expertise.

Instead, she waited, practicing a patience she wasn't known for.

Night lengthened and the storm that had been brewing whipped through, lightning and rain pounding the hillside and forcing her to get closer to the shelter the trio shared than she preferred. They were smart, keeping watch, and it wasn't until the early hours of the morning, just as the pre-dawn glow was starting to chase away the shadows, that Asajj's opportunity came.

Soaked and miserable from a sleepless night, she nonetheless held her ground and had waited, tucked close enough to the camp she could survey the trio of sleeping individuals. Their guard, the Ugnaught, had drifted off with the help of an insistently gentle Force persuasion, the tool he was working on lax in his hand and his soft snores barely audible over the hissing of the Kel'dor's breathing apparatus. On his belt was the treasure she sought and, concentrating, Asajj slowly reaching out with the invisible fingers of the Force, and lifted it silently from its resting place. With the datapad in hand, she swiftly copied the information to her own, nothing that it was encrypted as she did. She'd break the security later.

The datapad went back onto the belt of the Ugnaught. Without moving, she reached for the one in the pack of the Kel'dor, tucked easily within reach in the side pocket facing her. It followed the same routine, the data quickly copied and, if she wasn't mistaken, encrypted as well. The pad went back where she'd found it. Exhaling on a soft breath, she paused in her task, re-sending the compulsion to sleep to the Ugnaught when he began to stir in his sleep. He settled after several moments but Asajj knew her time was limited; the hard working species wouldn't stay out for much longer.

Reaching for the last datapad, she collected it from the pocket of the sleeping human female, pausing only briefly when the woman reached up to scratch her chin. She settled quick enough but Asajj was forced to abandon some of her stealth tactic; already she could *feel* the trio starting to consciously pull towards wakefulness. The female's datapad was

quickly copied and returned, but didn't make it back into the chest pocket. Instead Asajj slipped it close to her head instead, making it appear that it had fallen out during her rest.

Her task completed, Asajj slipped her datapad into her pocket and slowly backed away from the camp, carefully to place her feet where they'd cause the least amount of noise.

Once she was out of visual range, she released her hold on the Ugnaught's sleep, hearing him wake almost immediately with a snort and a grunt. Carefully, cautiously, she moved further away, taking her time to skirt the edge of the cliff while looking for a path upwards. After several careful minutes of putting distance between herself and the herders, she finally spied a ledge several hundred meters above her and, calling on the Force, sprang for it.

Her fingers caught the ledge, her toes the side of the cliff, and with minimal effort she rolled onto the narrow ledge. Glancing below to ensure her jump had gone unnoticed, she found that the trio had emerged from their cave and were making their way towards their happabores. Thus far, she'd remained unnoticed in the disappearing shadows of the new day.

Not willing to risk discovery and a potentially damning conversation, Asajj put her sights on the top of the cliff, found her next touch point and jumped.

Dandoran — Month Twenty Six, Day Twenty Two PEF

"Ani!"

He laughed as he chased her and Padmé darted between to trees. He lunged for her and missed, and Padmé laughed at him as she thwarted him again. "You're not fast enough, Anakin," she shot back at him, teasingly, ducking around another tree. "After all the physical conditioning you've done, you'd think—"

His hands closed about her waist even as his body crashed into hers, driving them both to the ground. They rolled, Anakin cushioning her fall and taking the brunt of the impact, only to continue to roll into a small clearing. They came to a stop, laughing and breathless, Padmé shaking her head as she stared down at him, grinning. "Don't you think we're a little old for this?"

"We're never too old to enjoy a little tussle," he teased, reaching up to smooth her hair, which was not covered in various leaves, moss and grasses. "Besides, some of my best memories are rolling around with you."

Padmé laughed, tilting her head to his so their foreheads touched, looking deep into his azure eyes. "So are mine," she confessed with a grin. "Only then, I couldn't do this..." Anakin's breath hitched as she leaned down and pressed her lips to his, his hands sliding into her hair as the pins snapped free, cradling the back of her head as her lips slid over his in a gentle, but passionate, kiss.

They stayed locked together that way for several long moment, simply exploring one another in the quiet, peaceful moment. Yet, moments between them had never stayed that way. Anakin rolled her to her back and the mood between them changed, shifted into the charged atmosphere that had always seemed to accompany their courtship and physical interactions. Her skin prickled, becoming overly sensitive as his fingers ghosted over it, his

lips leaving hers with what sounded like her name on them, to touch the pulse point at the juncture of her neck.

Unexpectedly, he withdrew, his blue eyes intense as they opened to meet hers, shining like the blue of his lightsaber as he searched her gaze for something. “I’m never letting you go, Padmé,” he swore to her softly, intently, the hardness in his gaze blazing with determination and intent. “Nothing and no one will ever keep us apart again.”

***Trenwyth* — Month Twenty Six, Day Twenty Seven PEF**

Six days.

It had taken her almost *six whole days* to break the encryption on the information she’d taken from the traders, her grudging respect for her prey climbing beyond where it had been before. Clearly, he knew the chances of being tracked and Asajj had needed to break out the encryption decoded her prey had provided her with so long ago to be able to even start a decryption. Tedious as it was, she was patient; she had to be.

Six days to access the information in any kind of useful fashion was a long time but the wait, she found as she was reading through the material, was well worth it. Safe havens littered the planet, each detailed with how many people they would hold, the amenities each one had and the instructions of use. Also included were the locations of the moving labs and clinics which tended to happabore infections of the parasites. There were several noted across the planet, along with their routes and scheduled stops, but Asajj knew she was close; she could *feel* it.

Quickly discounting the locations afield by more than a week, Asajj focused on the five that were closest to her current position. Each was ranked in the information with the supplies and expertise of the individual running the mobile clinic. Each, unfortunately, had similar ratings and none had the names of the individuals who were responsible for them. At least, not one that was familiar. Perhaps a way to minimize playing favorites? Whatever the reason, names weren’t included and so it left Asajj with three mobile clinics to track down and explore.

If she was lucky, based on their locations at the time of the data upload, they were each within several days of one another. She carefully traced their trajectories, noting that three of them would meet up together in two days, leaving her with just two others to explore. Should she not find her prey, that would leave her with one location to check for the remaining trio. Plotting the courses, she made her plan, mapping out how best to intercept each one and where, taking her time to examine the topographical maps of the areas and planning her ambushes carefully.

Several hours later she was confident in her plans and Asajj broke camp, turning her feet towards the first intercept point; a point some thirty hours away. Time was wasting; the sooner she was able to determine where her prey *wasn’t*, the sooner she could collect him and be on her way. The sooner, she thought bitterly, she could get back to what she was best at; hunting Jedi and staying as far beyond Vader’s reach as possible.

Month Twenty Seven, Day 1 PEF

Chapter 84

Dandoran — Month Twenty Seven, Day One PEF

Wrapping her robe around her waist, Padmé tied it off as she stepped out onto the room's balcony as the mist among the trees began to sparkle in the predawn glow.

Bird song echoed through the forest around her, some herbivore drinking at the edge of the natural spring she could just make out from the edge of the balustrade. Mist shimmered, turning the foliage to a diamond shine and changing the dark jungle into a temporary place of magic.

The mornings on Dandoran were always wonderful and the highlight of her day. Several weeks of time with Anakin in the enchanted setting had done much to relieve her stress level.

Anakin was attentive and charming, their time together his sole focus. Being with him, like this, without the pressures of the Galaxy around them, or the search for the twins, caring for her, *focusing* on her with such devotion, had put color back in her cheeks and muscles back on her body. Fit in ways she hadn't been since before the twins were born, Padmé felt healthier in body and soul, more *capable* of dealing with the upcoming challenges, than she had for a long time. Where their absence was still a seeping wound on her heart, it was no longer an incapacitating one. Anakin has set them a morning routine, similar to the ones they'd had on missions together, and drawing her ever closer, ever deeper, back into his orbit.

Back into the cautious belief that they *could* work; that they *would*. The cautious part of her, the part that had kept her alive and driving forward after all of the betrayals she'd endured, was forced into willful silence. Silenced, but not completely gone. Part of her was waiting for everything to spiral into darkness again, for the inevitable betrayal, even as she struggled to believe it wouldn't happen. Until he proved for certain, one way or another, he wouldn't break her heart again, she was going to continue to proceed with caution.

Muscled arms slid around her waist just as warm, wet lips pressed to the skin of her neck. Chill bumps rose on her skin as she shivered under the rasp of his unshaven cheek. "Ani."

He didn't answer her, though she felt his smile before his lips left her neck and she was drawn back against his bare chest. His chin came to rest on the top of her head and she felt his chest expand in a slow breath even as his hand splayed on her stomach.

Content to be held, Padmé watched as the diamond shimmer of the morning dissipated under the rise of the sun, shrouding the jungle's secrets once more.

It wasn't until the sun was above the horizon that she finally turned and tilted her face to her husband for a morning kiss. "Good morning."

"Morning." Their kiss lingered for a long moment before he lifted his head and smiled, his blue eyes twinkling. "Good isn't good enough; I've an angel in my arms in paradise."

Her cheeks heated. “Charmer.”

“Only when I’m inspired,” reaching up, Anakin brushed a stray lock of her hair behind one ear. His hands slid down, linking low on her abdomen as he brushed his lips across hers again. “And you, Padmé, *always* inspire me.”

Forehead to forehead, Padmé stared into his eyes, basking in the brilliance of his sincerity and soaking up the heat of his embrace. She lowered her hands to cradle his, remembering their discussion the night before with a faint blush. That she’d even been *open* to the idea after all this time had shocked her. “You make me forget myself, Anakin.”

“Then I’m in good company.” He closed his eyes for a moment, his grip tightening as he hugged her to him on a sigh. Visibly reluctant, he met her gaze again as his hold relaxed. “Our meal’s on the table.”

“Ani...”

“Artoo and Threepio did all the work,” he told her with a grin, “I just told them what to make.”

They’d been spoiling her with some of her favorite dishes for weeks. If there had been lakes off their balcony, Padmé would almost have pictured herself back on Naboo with Anakin as a Padawan and the last half dozen years never having happened. Not that she yearned to replay that time; Anakin in his full glory, fully grown and confident in himself, was a feast in of itself. One she wasn’t about to deny herself when he was so determined to be at her mercy.

“If they made it once, they can make it again,” turning fully, Padmé slid her hands up Anakin’s chest to link them at the back of his neck, using him to align them once again from hip to toe. “I think I want desert first.”

His eyes glittering, Anakin’s reply was to whisk her back to bed.

Padmé and Anakin were out walking when his commlink suddenly beeped, the foreign noise jarring in the peaceful stillness of the jungle. He frowned at it. “I thought I told Threepio to hold all transmissions.”

“If he’d breaking your orders, it must be important.”

“*Nothing* is more important than you, Padmé.” Anakin dismissed the call with a flick of his fingers... only to have the commlink blare back to life almost immediately. He dismissed it again, flicking the silence button and resumed walking.

They crossed through a series of natural arches, and Padmé enjoyed the moist feel of the air and Anakin’s hand, solid in her. As she glanced down, she frowned, seeing that the on his arm continued to blink. A glance at him and she noted the tenseness of his shoulders, a tension that had been missing these many weeks. They hadn’t been conversing, but after several minutes of watching him get more and more distracted, Padmé pulled him to a halt at the juncture of the path leading back to their villa.

His look he turned on her was inquisitive but strained.

“Enough is enough, Anakin.”

“What—”

“Threepio and Artoo wouldn’t disrupt us if they didn’t have cause. Go see what they need; I’ll still be here when you’re done.”

He sighed. “I hate the idea of being away from you, even for those few minutes.”

“You’ve been gone longer,” she teased gently. “Five or six minutes is hardly a deployment to the outterrim sieges.”

Anakin chuckled before bending down to brush his lips over hers. “Ten minutes. No more.”

“The chrono’s running, Ani.”

He took off with a smirk, leaving her on her own.

Padmé shook her head, rubbing her hand over her suddenly tense stomach muscles, and tried to ignore the whisper of intuition that their time together was at an end; that the galaxy was about to intrude with a vengeance. While, logically, she knew that they couldn’t stay on Dandoran for any real length of time, the time they’d had so far had been wonderful. Rejuvenating. In ways that were both intensely personal and as a couple. Anakin had been attentive without being overbearing. They’d taken care of one another and instead of feeling smothered, Padmé genuinely felt, once again, like she was loved.

Images of the night before played through her mind.

Her doubts had dwindled over their time together, culminating in their lovemaking the night before when Anakin had caught her between tender moments, charming and laughing with her. Sweetly persuasive, he’d been lingering over loving her when the vulnerability in his gaze had caught hers. He’d been raw. Open. Telling her with such an aching sadness of just how robbed he’d felt over having every moment of Luke and Leia’s life stolen from him. Feeling the same, more so, it had felt perfectly natural for her to suggest they add to their family.

Anakin’s response had been instantaneous and passionate. The lingering, delicious ache in her well used muscles made her smile.

With a shake of her head, Padmé continued towards the villa; if their time on Dandoran was coming to an end, she was going to enjoy this last walk.

Ten minutes later, Anakin still hadn’t returned and Padmé was just climbing the steps to the terrace when the sound of an irate Artoo reached her ears. Without pause, she entered the villa only to come to a stuttering stop as she reached the corner to the living area. Anakin was on one knee before Artoo, his back to her, but every muscle she could see was wound tight enough to snap. Whatever he’d been watching, the holo was just fading, the light of Artoo’s projector dying to nothing. Artoo made another noise and Anakin’s head came around, clearly not having heard the door or her advance into the house.

“Pamdé!”

There were lines around his mouth and eyes but it was the crystal blue of his irises, dulled to a cloudy grey, that made her heart sink and confirm her fears. Their time on Dandoran had come to an end. “When do we leave?”

Anakin pushed to his face with a grimace. “I’d rather not, but I’ve been called back on an... urgent matter.”

“Then we should move quickly.”

“I’m sorry, Padmé.” She didn’t resist as he cupped her shoulders between his hands, his expression contrite. “I’d hoped we’d have more time...”

“We didn’t exactly waste any of it,” she teased, trying to make him smile. “I’ll go pack our things, Anakin; why don’t you go prep the ship?”

He sighed, bending down to press his forehead to hers, his eyes closing. Enjoying the silence, relishing his touch, Padmé mirrored him and breathed deeply. Taking in his scent, mixed with the pure Dandorani air, she committed it to memory. For a long moment, they stood locked together until Artoo toddled a soft, apologetic interruption.

“I know, Artoo,” Anakin sighed, stepping back reluctantly as she opened her eyes. “Come on, buddy. Threepio can help Padmé pack. Let’s go warm up the ship.”

Artoo’s beep was definitely apologetic and Padmé shook her head. “It’s alright, Artoo. We won’t be long.”

Anakin strode out of the villa, Artoo on his heels, and Padmé turned to the stairs. “Threepio?”

“Yes, mistress Padmé?”

His answer came from above. “We need to leave, Threepio; get the bags, Anakin and Artoo have gone to get the ship prepped.”

“Yes, mistress.”

And, just like that, their time on Dandoran was at an end.

Angel of Iego — Month Twenty Seven, Day One PEF

“Set the hyperspace course, Artoo.”

Artoo trundled over to the port and plugged in as Padmé turned her seat towards the view port. She listened with half an ear to Anakin and Artoo setting their course and prepping for the hyperspace jump as the ship cleared the atmosphere. The marbled surface spread out below them and coalesced into the lovely marble planets tended to be from space. Her heart squeezed in her chest. “Do you think we’ll ever come back, Ani?”

“Count on it,” he returned easily. “We made some good memories here, my love; I think we can make a few more.”

They shared a brief look as Anakin set them on a course away from the planet. She didn’t distract him as they weaved through the space traffic coming towards the planet, and set them

into position for the hyperspace trajectory they would need. “Ready, Artoo?”

The astromech toodled an affirmation that couldn’t be missed. Anakin hit the levers that would catapult them into hyperspace without missing a beat. The starlines elongated as they transitioned into the corridor that would send them across the galaxy.

Anakin checked a couple of readings and then met her inquisitive gaze. “I’ve a couple of things I need to check before we get back, Padmé.”

“You make it sound like this won’t be that long of a trip.”

“It won’t be.”

“Oh?”

Anakin grimaced. “We’re taking the shortest route to our destination, which should keep us in transit about six or seven hours.” He turned back to the controls, as if dismissing her. “Why don’t you get some sleep?”

“And what’s our destination?”

There was a long silence before Anakin spoke again. “A surprise?”

Something in his tone was different from when they were on Dandoran; distant. Anakin, the relaxed and charming man she’d spent the better part of the last several weeks with was withdrawing into himself. It would have been just after time for their evening meal, Dandoran time, and Padmé’s stomach growled, reminding her of it. Without missing a beat, she undid her crash webbing and pushed to her feet, determined to not lose what they’d found in paradise; to not let the oh so small voice of doubt regain its foothold in her mind. “I’ll go find us something to eat while you finish up.” Stopping by his chair, she slid her hands into his hair on either side of his face, tipping his chin up so she could bend slightly down and kiss him. It was a sweet, lingering kiss, designed to leave him wanting more. Barely pulling away, she spoke against his lips, her words full of promise. “Don’t be too long.”

His slow smile as she pulled away was followed with a wink. “Wild gundarks couldn’t keep me away.”

There he was; Padmé burst out laughing. “Considering I *know* a queen of them was once enamored with you, I think it’s safe to say I believe you.”

Anakin chuckled and turned back to the controls again, looking at her briefly over his shoulder with a half smile. “I won’t be long.”

With a nod, Padmé gave him one last, lingering look, before heading out of the cockpit and leaving him to his tasks.

Anakin joined her for dinner, leaving the ship in Artoo’s capable hands, but even as they shared their evening meal, Padmé could *feel* the distance growing between them. Anakin was present, or so he seemed, until there would be a lull in their conversation and then his eyes would grow unfocused, looking elsewhere; inward. Almost as if he was struggling with something he couldn’t speak with her about.

“Ani?”

He refocused on her with a shake of his head. “Hm? Did you say something, Padmé?”

“Is there something bothering you?”

“We...” he visibly hesitated.

The churning ball of foreboding that had been building in her gut since they’d left Dandoran drew tighter. “What is it?”

“I have to go back.”

“Back?” She didn’t fully understand his meaning as she placed her fork on the table beside her plate, giving him her full attention as she wiped her lips with her napkin. “What do you mean, back?”

“Exactly what it sounds like, my love.” He sighed, taking a long pause as he mirrored her actions and then folded his hands together with his elbows resting on the table, looking at her directly. There was a wealth of emotion she couldn’t fully read in his stormy blue eyes. “I’ve been recalled to duty, Padmé.”

Padmé flinched as if he’d struck her. After two short, marvelous and magical weeks with no worried but one another, they were going back. They were going back, and already he was pulling away. “I... see.”

“I’ve tasks I’ve put off for a while. Too long a while. I was reminded of that today.”

“What kind of tasks?”

“A pressing diplomatic interventions, for one.”

“You?” A laugh burst from her unexpectedly. “Unless it’s an aggressive negotiation, I don’t know that you’re the best person for the job, Ani.”

He lifted his glass and toasted her with it in acknowledgement as his lips twisted in a wry smile. “While I agree, it doesn’t exactly change the fact I’ve been assigned the task.”

“That’s hardly a reason to go back.”

“I should have dealt with it before we went anywhere, but I’ve been putting it off. The vote is in three days.”

And the Senate waiting for no one.

“I’ve also been neglecting my duties to my men and my ship, Padmé. I shouldn’t have left, but I couldn’t resist taking this time for us.” Padmé grasped the hand he stretched out to her, lacing his fingers with hers, as she searched his gaze. His words were solemn; soft. “You...” something flickered in his gaze., “We needed it.”

A lump formed in her throat and she closed her eyes against the emotion that threatened to overtake her. They needed more than a pair of weeks, but it had been a wonderful start. “We did,” she agreed, opening her eyes as he squeezed her fingers and let go, his gaze dropping back to his glass. She stared at her own for a long moment, cradling it between her hands.

Softly, as she stared at the liquid within, she tentatively began to give voice to something she hadn't dared allow herself to believe. "I hope..."

Anakin's silence didn't encourage her to continue and a quick glance at him showed he was idly turning the mug to and fro, lost once again in thought, her presence forgotten.

Swallowing hard, Padmé finished the thought silently. *I hope I don't regret wanting to trust you again, Anakin.*

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Seven, Day One PEF

They landed back on the *Exactor* with a minimum of fanfare, the return to the militaristic life as jarring as the wilds of Dandoran had been. Troopers waiting for them as they disembarked from the *Angel*, Artoo and Threepio trailing behind as Vader escorted her back to their quarters. The honor detail took up their positions and the churning within Padmé's gut reminded her of every reason why trusting him was a bad thing; aside from his turn to the dark side.

A side she'd seen nothing of in weeks. Perhaps being with her had him rethinking his path?

Taking a deep breath as Anakin left her in their quarters to attend to his duties on the bridge, Padmé let the door close and looked about the familiar space. It wasn't home, but neither was it a prison unless she chose to make it one. Determinedly pushing away from the door and heading into the room, she set about making a couple of changes to the areas she most frequented, determined to squash the little voice in the back of her head.

Now that they were back, how long before the darkness that had been silenced within him rose to the surface once again?

Only time would tell if Anakin, *her* Anakin, was there to stay.

Month Twenty Seven - Day 3 PEF

Chapter 85

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Seven, Day Three PEF (Post Empire Formation)

The *Exactor* shuddered, waking Padmé with a start. Disoriented and half asleep, she stretched her hand to grasp her husband. “Anakin?”

Her touch came up empty. Anakin was no longer beside her in bed, the indent of his head on his pillow the only evidence he'd once been there. Even his warmth, as she ran her hand under the blankets next to her, was gone. The familiar feel of coming out of hyperspace brought her upright even as she slapped the bed side and turned the lights on. She was alone and naked in their bed, the whine of the engines a louder hum of energy as the ship's interstellar engines kicked off. Sliding out of bed, Padmé hurriedly threw her clothes on and dragged her fingers through her hair even as she headed for the living room.

“Anakin?”

He glanced over his shoulder, his expression unreadable, from where he stood by the sofa, his cloak spread across its back. “You didn't have to get up.”

“The... exit from hyperspace woke me.” As the words rolled off her tongue, Padmé couldn't help but notice that there was a planet in the viewport with beautiful blue oceans and expanses of visibly pristine mountains and forests. A sense of familiarity struck her but she couldn't place it. “Where are we?”

Anakin sighed, in the middle of buckling his glove on his hand, avoiding her gaze. “Alderran.”

Padmé flinched, feeling as if she'd been slapped. *Alderran. Bail's home planet.* After what he and Mon Mothma had done to her, Padmé has no desire to visit the paradise, certainly not with the snake in residence who ruled it. Swallowing hard, she forced herself to be curious; Anakin didn't look any happier to be there than she did. “Why?”

“Senator Organa is the official head of the Senate Opposition,” Padmé flinched again, unable to help the reaction; her position in the senate was just one more thing Bail had stolen from her, “and there's a bill before the Senate that he's objecting to. I've been asked to persuade him to change his stance.”

Padmé struggled from asking after the bill, reminding herself she was no longer a senator and it didn't matter to her. All that mattered in this instance was that she was currently at the home of a man who'd betrayed her in such a fundamental way; she couldn't conceive of even stepping foot on the *planet*.

“What is it?”

Looking up, Padmé jumped as she realized that she was staring at the planet below and her fingers were digging hard enough into her hands to leave bloodless half moons. Anakin's hands touched hers. "What?"

"Did Bail do something to you, Padmé?" Anakin's eye flickered and sparked, searching hers even as his touch was gentle, unwrapping her fingers and tucking them into his own. "Did he hurt you?"

Looking into his eyes, Padmé opened her mouth... only to have no sound emerge. *Tell him*, she told herself fiercely, watching the blue of Anakin's gaze flicker golden and back again. *Do it and Bail's a dead man*, her conscience whispered in reply. Struggling with her conscience and against the *want* to trust him, Padmé felt the weight of her decision keenly. Bail had been a friend, but had betrayed her no worse than Anakin had when he'd abandoned her on Mustafar. Did she truly owe him any loyalty?

"Padmé?"

"He..." she swallowed hard, unable to get the words out even as gold flickered more strongly in Anakin's gaze. "He de-denied... he wouldn't... didn't..."

"Give you aid? Help you search for Luke and Leia?"

She nodded; it was the truth, even if it was only a part of it. She couldn't bring herself to tell him the rest; not yet. She hadn't considered doing so since their last failed attempt to find Luke and Leia and even as she kept her silence, Padmé knew she needed to make a decision. They'd come so far on Dandoran, reconnecting in ways she hadn't thought possible. Wouldn't the search for their children benefit from him having a discussion with Bail?

Only if he doesn't kill him as soon as he knows.

Anakin pulled her into his arms, his embrace tight, as he offered her comfort. "I'm sorry he wouldn't help you."

So was she.

Bail and Mon Mothma's actions had cost her more than just the twins; it had irrevocably damaged two of her closest friendships, destroying whatever trust had been between the trio. The rift had left a gaping hole in her life; had severed the last of her trust in others. Closing her eyes, she warred with herself, struggling to silence her doubts and give him the information he needed, the biggest clue she had, to Luke and Leia's whereabouts.

"I was going to ask you to come with me, Padmé," he released her, looking down at her solemnly as he tucked a strand of her hair behind one ear, "and ask to make use of your *expert* diplomatic skills. I won't though. Knowing Bail wouldn't help you... I won't ask you to face him, my love."

"I *can't*, Anakin."

"It's okay," he offered her a faint smile before bending down to kiss her. "That means I should review the information on the bill before I meet with him tomorrow. Will you be alright while I prepare?"

"I... I think I'll hit the training *sallé*," she offered, forcing herself to smile in return as he stepped away and she lost his warmth. "I have a sudden urge to hit something."

Idiot!

Padmé slammed her hand into the padded dummy, following up with a one-two combination that ended with a slide kick, hard enough to jar her whole body. *I had a perfectly good chance to tell him about Bail and I didn't!*

If Anakin knew, he'd kill him!

And that's a bad thing?

Bail isn't evil; he did what he thought was right to keep Luke and Leia out of the Empire's hands!

Spinning the other way, she struck the bag on a backwards kick, rolling forward with the momentum only to spin gracefully back to her feet and land another jarring set of punches as she argued with herself. Her heart and her head warring as they never had before. Back and forth she went, inwardly focused, even as sweat stung her eyes, the battle within her playing out with the punching bag.

Anakin wouldn't kill anyone.

He did in the war.

Bail's not his enemy and if I'm going to trust him, I need to trust him!

Her wrists and hands ached, her legs cramping as she continued to assail the bag, going back and forth, no closer to a decision than she'd been when she'd entered the room.

He's changed.

Has he? He's still the fleet commander, the second most powerful individual in the galaxy.

He's Anakin! My Anakin!

Then why is it a question about trust? Either I trust him or I don't...

He's done nothing but show me I can trust him since giving me the holo of the twins.

Then trust him with Bail and Mon Mothma's identities and their part in Luke and Leia's disappearance; if he's really Anakin, they're in no trouble.

Aren't they? You know what he did to the Sandpeople who killed his mother!

"Luke and Leia aren't dead!"

With a desperate cry, Padmé slammed into the bag and rebounded to the mat, breathing raggedly as she lay prone for long minutes, sucking, gulping air into lungs screaming for oxygen, her body one massive ache. Around her, the room spun in slow motion as her oxygen-starved tissues slowly re-oxygenated. Dwelling on her inner turmoil, Padmé compared everything that she'd seen in Anakin's behavior these last few weeks and knew she *wanted* to trust him.

Grinding the heels of her hands into her eyes, Padmé inhaled deeply and held it; a small, tiny voice in the back of her head was telling her that she didn't want her children raised by a

Sith. Willfully ignoring it in the face of everything Anakin had done to support her, to *help* her, Padmé has a sudden, inescapable yearning to have her family all together. Anakin had earned the chance to be the good father she knew he could be; the good man he'd *proven* he could be these past weeks.

I need to tell him, she decided silently as the room stopped its slow spin, willfully disregarding her concerns. *He needs the information to find our children.*

And he's earned it, hasn't he?

Anakin had mis-stepped many a time in their relationship, always finding his way back to her. Surely this was no different?

If she trusted him with this, it would give him the best clue to finding their children, narrowing down the planets to search, if nothing else. If they worked together, could somehow stay close as they had been on the *Angel*... Giving him the information about Bail would help that; would ensure their continued search wasn't in vain.

Pushing herself slowly to her feet, Padmé groaned as she stretched, moving slowly before her muscles seized. She went through a cool down routine, careful to walk and stretch, drinking water as she moved to ensure she didn't cramp. It took her almost twenty five standard minutes before she felt she was done and headed for the door.

Padmé was stepping into the hallway from the training *sallé* when she caught sight of a familiar figure stepping off the nearby turbo lift. Wiping her face with a towel, she blinked the sweat from her eyes only to see the same, pale, slender figure striding towards her, her eyes on a datapad as she shifted a container under one arm.

Exhaustion marred the pale, familiar face, and her clothing was torn, tattered and streaked with what looked like mud and foliage, but there was no mistaking the woman walking in her direction.

"Asajj?"

The Force adept stopped mid-stride, her head coming up so quickly, Padmé was surprised there wasn't an audible snap. The look of pure hatred on Asajj's face didn't put her off at all; Padmé hadn't seen Asajj since the Force Adept had attempted to help her escape — and subsequently threatened her life. Their meeting was accidental and, by the look of the Force adept, unwanted. Asajj turned down a corridor and Padmé increased her pace to catch up.

Artoo toddled an objection, trundling along side Padmé's as her only escort; a measure of Anakin's trust in her, she supposed.

"Asajj!" Padmé caught up with Asajj as she was striding towards her quarters.

"So he's let slip the leash, has he?" Asajj's tone was scathing. "What did you do to earn your freedom, Padmé? Please him in bed? Promise to love him, the monster you—"

"Anakin's not a monster," Padmé broke in with a snap in her voice.

"*Anakin?*" Ventress laughed but it was a dark, evil sounding laugh. "He's fooled you so completely has he? Was it his soft words and gentle touches? Or perhaps those oh so blue eyes you've never been able to say no to?"

“He’s *not* a monster.”

“Need I remind you of your failure on Toydaria almost six standard months ago; of what drove you to even *consider* looking at him through the scope of a sniper rifle? How swiftly you forget, *Lady Vader*.” With a shake of her head, she turned to face Padmé, her words scathing. “Do you think you’ve tamed him? Turned him back to the light side? Has he found redemption in your tender heart?”

“He’s my Anakin!”

Ventress burst out laughing, the dark edge to it remaining, her eyes flashing with dark mirth and an emotion that looked suspiciously like pity. “You’re a gullible fool, Padmé.” Asajj stepped into her personal space, bringing them nose to nose, withing a whisper of a touch, her eyes flashing. “Mark my words well, *Lady Vader*; you see only what he wants you to see. You hear, only what he wants you to hear. Has he told you about Lianna and Umgal? Belkadan, Balmorra or Eridau?”

Refusing to be baited, Padmé glared at her even as the names sounded incredibly familiar.

“Trust him at your peril, *my Lady*; he will destroy all that you’ve worked for before he consumes you... and I have no intention of letting him do that before I get to sink my blade into your belly.”

Asajj’s door closed before Padmé could respond, Artoo making a disrespectful sound at the door before posing her an inquiry.

“I’m okay, Artoo.” The names Asajj had thrown at her swam around and around in her head. *Why?* “Do those planets mean anything to you?”

His short, negative noise was unmistakable. “Okay; let me try a different tact; *should* those names mean something to you?”

The droid’s response was long enough, Padmé had to check the translation. She scanned it, having to reach out and read through several paragraphs of text, each line making her more and more pale. Names and locations littered the explanation, *Jedi* names she recognized as Jedi she’d helped

“No.” Her whispered denial was broken and she shook her head, backing away from Artoo. “No, he wouldn’t... he—” her thoughts were spinning as she reached out to put one hand against the wall for support.

Artoo’s inquiry was soft, almost hesitant.

Padmé shook her head. “I have to ask him, Artoo; Anakin was a Jedi, he couldn’t have hunted down all those... Not after...” she shook her head again. “It’s Asajj, isn’t it? Asajj is trying to destroy the progress we’ve made, right? That’s why she’s telling me this? Trying to get me to doubt him, to doubt us?”

The droid was silent, offering no opinion.

“Come on, Artoo,” she waved him forward as she pushed off the wall. “I need to ask Anakin a couple of questions.”

It didn't take long for Padmé to get back to their suite and she went straight to the communication terminal by the door as Artoo headed for Threepio and the charging station. Checking the comm code that Anakin had left for her, she keyed it in. It beeped long tones, not connecting and she frowned. Trying again, she double checked the code and keyed it in, checking each number after each entry.

Long beeped tones greeted her again; nothing.

Where is Anakin?

Trying another tactic, Padmé keyed in the code for the bridge — or rather, what *had* been the bridge code during the Clone Wars; with any luck, it wouldn't have been changed. It was an uncomfortable realization that there was no reason for it *to* be changed. The call had barely been put in when it was answered.

"Bridge."

Padmé opened her mouth to ask her questions when she suddenly paused, uncomfortable. What should she call him? Anakin was who he was, but did the troops call him General Skywalker anymore? She'd only heard him addressed as Lord Vader, yet, after their weeks together, that seemed inappropriate.

"Lady Vader?"

Padmé jumped as the voice on the other end of the comm. addressed her directly, unable to help the cringe it induced in the wake of Asajj's earlier vitriol. "Deck officer?"

"May I assist you?"

"I— how did you know it was me?"

"Lord Vader is current off comms., milady; an urgent matter that cannot wait. May I assist you?"

"I—" she exhaled softly. "No. Thank you."

Padmé snapped the comm. off, frowning as she headed further into the room. An urgent Matter had brought them to Alderaan, how could a *different* urgent matter take him away from that task?

With no way to get answers to her pressing questions, Padmé let out a frustrated sigh.

Heading for the 'fresher, she couldn't help the information spiraling about in her brain, unable for it to find a foothold. Names and dates, dates *after* capture and even some of them dates during their time on Dandoran, for Jedi who had been eliminated off a kill list. A list that looked, if she wasn't mistaken, like the relocation list she'd compiled and successfully *completed* some months ago.

As Padmé stepping into the shower, she found she couldn't turn off the horrible suspicions that were nagging at her; she needed Anakin's reassurance that Asajj was just being spiteful. Needed to hear it from his lips, to see it in his eyes that Asajj was *wrong*.

Through a lonely evening, a singular meal she picked at and hours of running everything around and around in her head, Anakin remained uncharacteristically absent and silent.

Despite her need to speak with him, he sent her no messages and made no trip to their quarters.

Padmé slept alone that night, tossing and turning, knowing he'd be planet side the next day with Bail.

It was a long, sleepless and lonely night.

Alderaan — Month Twenty Seven, Day Four PEF

Bail Organa paced back and forth as he waited for the shuttle that would bring the man once known as the Hero of the Republic to his doorstep for the first time since his fall and subsequent rise, to the Emperor's second. When Bail had received word that Lord Vader had *requested* an audience the day before Bail was due on Coruscant to attend the vote on a bill he had introduced, Bail had almost swallowed his tongue.

Not only was he one of the most vocal and outspoken voices against certain of the Emperor's proposed and dictated reforms, but behind the curtain, he was one of several leaders in a growing Rebellion against the Empire. A Rebellion that believed in the freedoms that had been stripped from the people over the long years of The Clone Wars, cemented with the transformation of the Republic into the Empire; a Rebellion that was determined to see them restored.

Vader's attendance on Alderaan was *dangerous*; in more ways than just professionally as, if Vader gained even an *inkling* of what Bail had done to the dark lord *personally*, Bail's life and the life of his wife would be forfeit.

A heavy burden on most days, Bail found that today the secrets surrounding his life weighed more heavily than most.

"Senator Organa?"

His head came up to find the head of his guard standing before him. "Yes, Captain?"

"Lord Vader's shuttle is on its final approach, sir."

"They'll touch down on schedule?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you, Captain."

The Captain saluted and turned on his heel, leaving Bail to his worries and preparations.

Taking a deep breath, Bail straightened his vest and then smoothed his hands over the panels of his blazer. Folding his station around him with a quick tug, followed by a swift, sure swipe across his shoulders to ensure his half cape was in place, and Bail set his feet to the path that would take him to the landing pad.

The door opened at his touch even as the shuttle bringing Vader folded its wings and began its final landing sequence. Keeping his steps slow but certain, Bail timed his walk through the corridors to arrive at the landing bay as Vader was coming down the ramp.

“Lord Vader; Welcome to Alderran.”

“Senator Organa,” Vader extended his hand, which Bail took and shook. “You’re looking well.”

“Fatherhood agrees with me,” Bail agreed, squeezing firmly and letting go; he motioned for the Dark Lord to join him as they headed across the open pathway towards the main building. “Forgive me for saying so, but I’m afraid I don’t have much time as I’m due on Coruscant to attend the vote. If I’m to make the session, I must depart before mid-day.”

“This won’t take long,” Vader assured him with an easy smile, one that didn’t reach his eyes, as he fell into step with Bail. “The vote is why I’m here.”

Inwardly, Bail exhaled a tiny breath of relief. If Vader was here for *that*, he wasn’t here for a more personal reason. “Do you mind if I ask what about the vote, My Lord?”

“The Emperor’s decrees are tabled for ratification in the Senate for a reason, Senator.”

Vader looked ahead of them and Bail considered the profile of the powerful man beside him. He looked so like the young man Bail remembered as a shining example of Jedi strength and goodness, his heart hurt. More so as he silently acknowledged just how thoroughly he’d been duped by both the former Jedi and his old friend Padmé. “And he’s done so, my Lord. Just as it’s our responsibility in the Senate to bring any potential issues with such proposed measures.”

They walked several more feet before Bail opened the door to the waiting area. Vader proceeded him into the room before Bail stepped in behind him.

A quick glance around the room confirmed for Bail that his attendants had set up refreshments and more comfortable chairs for their discussion. “May I offer you some refreshments, my Lord?”

“Thank you.” Vader accepted the goblet that was handed to him and took a sip as he settled into one of the sofas. “Your family won’t be joining you on Coruscant, Senator?”

“Not this time,” Bail told him with a tight smile and a shake of his head, sitting opposite the younger man. “Breha doesn’t travel well, especially with our daughter being so active. Rather than add to her stress, I’ll be travelling without them, I’m afraid.”

“Is Breha unwell?”

“Her pulmonodes have been acting up,” Bail admitted, careful not to give away more than was common knowledge. “Nothing very serious; I don’t foresee this vote taking me away from her side for very long.”

“Surely you could take your... daughter?”

“Leia,” Bail agreed easily, knowing he would be doing her no favors if he attempted to hide his daughter from Vader; he had no intention of hiding her from the galaxy.

Vader paused, lifting his glass to his lips, his face freezing. “Leia?”

“It’s a... family name.” Bail offered with a charming smile. “We’ve always wanted a daughter and knew what we would call her the moment we knew she would be a part of our

lives.”

Cleaning his throat, Vader took another sip of his drink. “You’re very fortunate.”

“We are blessed.” Agreed Bail, taking a sip of his own. “But my family isn’t why you came to visit, my lord. You’re here regarding the anti-slavery amendment I’ve tabled, which is being voted on tomorrow.”

Vader inclined his head.

“I’m surprised you object, my lord.”

“I don’t,” the easy way Vader agreed with him had Bail’s eyebrows hitting his hairline. “The core of the bill is, I believe, quite sound and you’ve garnered quite the following; mostly in human dominated systems.”

“Then, forgive me, but I don’t see why the visit.”

“There are plans that you do not yet see, Bail. Plans that you *cannot* foresee.” Vader stretched one hand along the back of the sofa, his posture relaxed as the goblet dangled from his extended fingers. “A blanket anti-slavery opposition works in no ones favor. It will cost us our treaty with the Hutts, for one. I’m not saying that slavery *should* be legal; certainly not for humans.”

“Then what are you saying, my lord?”

“Amend your bill, Senator. You believe in democracy, let the human sectors and systems make their own decisions on who will and will not accept slavery as they always have. Amend it so that, whatever choice they make individually, it will not prevent interactions, *commerce* with those that do.”

Bail almost flinched. *Human* sectors. There were no human sectors, just representatives that were human. “The bill is more than that.”

“I know,” he was assured smoothly. “It calls for the release of *all* slaves in disputed systems and contains the framework for eventual galactic-wide anti-slavery platform.”

“You’ve done your reading.”

“You’re a dreamer, Bail.” Vader told him flatly, not playing the political niceness game; which Bail appreciated since the man wasn’t actually a diplomat. “It’s too much, too soon.”

“We don’t know that. The Senate may indeed vote in its favor.”

“They won’t; not as it is.”

There was such conviction in Vader’s words that Bail could do nothing but believe him. “And you think amending it to restrict the bill to human slaves only is the way to do it? That kind of exclusivity is only good for breeding division, not inclusion!”

“If you move forward to vote on the bill the way it is, without amendments, it won’t pass.”

“You can’t know that.”

Vader regarded him with a solemn expression. “How many bills of this kind failed in the last years and months of the Clone War, Bail? How many of these bills never even made it to

a vote? You've less support now than before the Empire's formation and if you think otherwise, you're fooling yourself."

Which wasn't saying much when Bail knew he was right. The bill was doomed to fail in its current format, but his conscience hadn't permitted him *not* to present it. "Your proposed amendments aren't much better."

"They're compromises, Bail," Vader countered with an easy smile Bail didn't trust. "A galactic blanket for freedom is a noble goal, but it will swiftly be forgotten and laughed into obscurity. If you truly want this to succeed, the systems need to make the decisions. For it to have a hope of ratification, those systems can't use the decision to cut ties with those who choose differently."

Inside, Bail flinched; there was no mistaking that *this* was why Vader had come. His bill was being manipulated and twisted; he was being dictated to. "And the immediate release of all slaves in those systems that choose not to observe slavery?"

"Humans should be freed first; naturally."

"Naturally?"

"They're the most adaptable and most likely to be able to survive in whatever area they find themselves. Their release will have the least impact on governments for their care and reeducation. Once their integration into society is complete, a year or two later, a census should be taken of those who remain in servitude and arrangements made to free them."

"And the galactic freedom bill?"

"The systems who vote to end slavery will be commended and watched, allowing others to learn for several years and gather data on how the process worked to be able to refine it. In say... ten years the systems can vote on it as a whole."

Which was a concession, Bail realized, but not the concession he was looking for. Slavery was *wrong* and the man before him knew it. Ten years under the Emperor's thumb would also be ten years the opposition would have to intimidate, undermine and crush any resistance. Which meant his Rebel work would be all the more important; what he couldn't accomplish in the Senate, legally, he'd look to correct illegally.

Conceding that he needed to play politics for the moment, he addressed the most obvious hurdle. "I won't have the time to make any amendments needed before the vote."

Vader smile and reached into a pocket, extracting a data disc. "How fortunate I anticipated your agreement with me, Senator. You'll find most of what we discussed is here. You'll want to review it swiftly and—"

"Daddy!"

Bail's heart leapt into his throat as a brown haired moppet, her hair so dark it was practically black, came tearing into the room on short, stubby legs and threw herself around his knees. "Leia!"

"Found you!"

Acutely aware of the silence and stillness of the man sitting across from him, Bail forced himself to breathe and smile for his daughter. “Daddy’s in a meeting, young lady. Where’s your nanny droid?”

Leia giggled, beaming up at him proudly even as her voice dropped into a stage whisper. “*I’m hiding.*”

Under different circumstances, she’d have made him laugh. With Vader watching their every interaction, however, he had no problem finding a frown for his daughter. “You shouldn’t hide from her, Leia; she’s there to help you.”

“She’s *boring!*” Dramatic as only little children can be, she suddenly spun and pinned their visitor with a blinding smile. “Are you Daddy’s visitor?”

Vader regarded her silently, for a long moment. “I am. And you are...?”

Leia preened and spun, dropping into a deliberate curtsy just like Breha had been teaching her, her small hands on the edges of her skirt. “Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan, daughter of Bail Organa and Queen Breha. I’m three years old,” her words were slow and precisely pronounced, pride evident in every syllable. “Thank you for visiting my daddy.”

With a chuckle, Vader lifted his free hand to his forehead and bent forward with a bit of a bow, charm in every line of his smile and posture. “The pleasure is all mine.”

“No!” Leia huffed, straightening, and stamped her foot. “No, no!”

“No, what?”

“I told you my name, now you tell me yours!”

“Leia—”

Vader’s chuckle surprised Bail when he would have taken her to task. “My sources said you adopted a baby. Some two years ago.”

“Formally, yes; but she was one by then.”

“Hey!” Leia stamped her foot again, not willing to be ignored. “What’s your name?”

Vader sketched a second half bow. “Lord Vader, Princess; at your service.”

“Daddy says you serve the Emperor.”

“As does your father.”

“Leia.” Bail cut into whatever she might say next. “That’s enough.”

She pouted but did as she was told. Bail rose to his feet and swept her into his arms, hiding her face in his neck as he felt her watching their visitor curiously.

Vader finished his glass and rose to his feet as well. “I won’t keep you any longer, Bail. It was a pleasure, Leia. I’m sure you’ll grow up to be just as feisty as your mother.”

“Bye!”

“I’ll read through your edits, my Lord, but I won’t table anything to vote on if I don’t believe in it.”

“Small steps, Bail,” Vader told him with a sharp nod, turning to the door that would take him back to his ship. “A grand gesture won’t get you what you want here; play politics, the long game, and it will come.”

Vader swept through the door and it closed behind him. Leia clung to Bail, her fingers toying with the collar of his suit. She was surprisingly silent as Bail bent his head to hers and let out a soft, relieved sigh. Vader had been too distracted by Leia’s antics to read anything in his answers.

They heard the engines ignite on take off and it wasn’t until the shuttle was airborne that Leia’s voice broke the silence.

“Is he a bad man, daddy?”

“No, sweetheart,” he told her honestly, for Bail had to believe that for all Vader now stood in Anakin’s place, something of him remained. “He just chooses to do bad things. Come on, let’s get you to your mother; maybe she can work on your manners with guests!”

Her laughter buoyed him even as he headed back towards the palace, pausing only long enough to collect the data disc Vader had left behind. It was a detour he could ill afford, but after the tense meeting with Vader, Bail needed the support of his family.

Month Twenty Seven, Day 4 & 5 PEF

Chapter 86

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Seven, Day Four PEF

The day passed slowly for Padmé, her mind going over and over what Anakin could possibly be speaking about with Bail, waffling between regretting not going and confident she'd made the right choice. When she wasn't thinking about Anakin, she was struggling to refute what she'd heard from Asajj about him.

Round and round she went, everything a mire and whirlwind in her mind, dragging her down and whipping her around all at the same time.

She spent the day staring out the viewport, looking at Alderaan without really seeing it as it turned beneath her. Blues and green passed below the swirling white of the clouds, passing above the hard surfaces of the planet much like her thoughts. Squalls formed in the oceans, flashes of lightning visible even from space.

Each one felt like a whisper of revelation, waiting to be heard and understood; waiting to be heeded.

Threepio tried to engage her in conversation, but Padmé barely heard him, responding to his overtures on auto pilot. When the droid tried to get her to eat at noon, she rebuffed him harshly and was left alone. Mostly.

Artoo eventually joined her at the viewport and, unlike his counterpart, was a silent sentry. He made no noise, just the soft whirring of his processors and servos and, absently, she dropped one hand to his dome in acknowledgement of his presence. Despite the fact Artoo hadn't been able to answer her questions, she found she couldn't hold his against him.

The sound of the comm. sounding was loud in the silence and made her flinch, turning her head to look at the terminal several feet away. The light flickered in the near-darkness, reflecting a greenish light off the ceiling and floors even as the chime sounded again. Padmé didn't move, staying where she was.

Anakin had been clear about her answering comm. calls and, despite her trepidation since their return to the *Exactor*, that caution hadn't been forgotten. If nothing else, Anakin had always had her safety first in his thoughts and she didn't doubt the danger she'd be in if she happened to answer a call from the wrong person. No; she knew very well the danger she'd be in. The galaxy still believed her dead; a sudden resurrection, at Anakin's side no-less, would put a target on her back so large she'd never find Luke and Leia.

The comm. chimed a couple more times before falling silent.

Padmé's gaze slid from the terminal and lingered on the door next to it; the door that led into Anakin's office. There it lingered, a thought forming in her head; one that hadn't been

there for some time. Could she get in? If she could access his computer logs, she could verify what Asajj had told her about the Jedi. With the man absent, the only obstacle between her and that information was Artoo; Threepio, she was fairly confident, didn't have the access code.

Did she dare?

She owed it to the Jedi to discover if she'd relocated them to their deaths; owed it to herself to know if she'd been deceived all this time.

In an uncharacteristic bout of indecision, Padmé second guessed herself and... hesitated. Anakin deserved a chance to explain himself, to answer the accusation that Asajj had made. He was a *good* man, surely Asajj was mistaken and bitter, willing to say *anything* to drive a wedge between them again. No. She couldn't assume that Asajj was right without giving him a chance to refute her claims. She couldn't invade his privacy like that.

Could she?

The sound of the door opening brought her around on her heel, ending the debate and rendering it purely academic.

"Padmé?"

Her flinch was unconscious and immediate. She couldn't see him from where she was standing, but his tone wasn't the one she'd become accustom to hearing on Dandoran. It was harder, with more of an edge. More like when she'd first come on board. Opening her mouth to respond, no sound came out. The light came on and she threw her hands up to shield her eyes.

"There you are." Anakin was before her before the stars were completely gone from her vision, his expression concerned. "Are you alright?"

Padmé's gaze went to his even as her stomach tied itself into further knots. Anakin looked the same as he had before he left, perhaps a little tight around his mouth; his hair fell in the same way it always did, framing his handsome face in such a way her fingers itched to touch it. Physically, he looked the same. His words were everything right, but his eyes weren't.

Clear as glacial ice on a summer's day, they were almost as cold. Guarded. Gone was the openness they'd shared in the last several weeks; gone was the easy affection she'd always been able to read. He was keeping her out again. "A..." she swallowed hard, "are you?"

Anakin's eyes shuttered further and he pulled up short, as if she'd struck him. "Fine. Why didn't you answer me?"

"I was... I was... thinking."

"In the dark while staring at Alderaan?" he frowned. "We're done here. We don't have to stay any longer."

Which was both a relief and a frustration, Padmé realized with some surprise. Unwilling to discuss Alderaan or its occupants, she blurted what had been on her mind. "Asajj is back."

"I know." His gaze narrowed. "She spoke with you."

It wasn't a question, but she answered anyway. "Yes."

"What did she say to you, Padmé?"

"She didn't want to."

"That wasn't the question."

"I made her speak with me, Anakin; she wasn't going to say anything." Why she was defending the Force adept, Padmé could only rationalize she'd seen the brutality Asajj had endured and the look on his face was promising more. Anakin might have been attentive in the best ways with her, but Padmé was under no illusion the lengths he'd go to, the lengths he'd *gone to*, to defend her.

"What did she tell you, Padmé?" His eyes flashed, hints of gold breaking through the icy blue, a sneer on his lips. "About our *visitor*, perhaps? The one she *personally* extended an invitation to?"

Visitor? Bewildered, Padmé shook her head. *What visitor?* "She spoke of Lianna, Anakin. Of Umgal and Belkaden. Balmorra and Eridau." with each recitation of a planet name, her shoulders squared a little more and her voice gained just a touch of force. Standing tall, she searched his gaze, golden glitter and all. "Tell me you didn't, Anakin."

His eyes lost their golden tint as one hand came up to cradle her cheek and she let him, refusing to break eye contact with him. "Your eyes sparkle when you're determined, did you know that?"

"Anakin."

He continued as if he hadn't heard her, stepping into her personal space. "You get this look... a look I remember so well from when I first met you, all those years ago, on Tatooine. Fierce." he leaned closer, his lips brushing against the curve of her cheek even as her hands pressed against his chest in an effort to keep him back. "Indomitable."

"Don't change the—"

His lips brushed hers, taking the words from hers. "Unwavering."

Whatever she might have said was cut off by his kiss. She knew she shouldn't fall for it, couldn't let him manipulate her wants to his own ends. And yet, even as she fought it, a part of her surrendered. She wanted this distraction, didn't *want* to have their happiness shattered by a truth she needed to hear. The topic wasn't going anywhere and, after a day of brooding and worry, of high stress and emotion, she *needed* this release.

For all she wanted to have this discussion, in that moment, she wanted to have *him* more.

Tomorrow would be soon enough to discuss the Jedi; tomorrow would be soon enough to shatter the illusion.

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Seven, Day Five PEF

Early morning

"I warned you about speaking with her, Ventress."

Asajj jerked to a stop, her back straightening as her whole being went on alert. The almost *friendly* tone that the message was relayed it only putting her more on edge. "She approached me, Master." Turning to face him, she kept her tone borderline respectful, not wanting to spend another several days in the bacta tank. "It would have been *rude* to ignore her."

Vader was standing several feet away, his arms crossed, feet firmly planted, in the middle of the corridor leading from the nearest lift. His cape was missing, though it left him no less imposing. Asajj had learned her lesson about being cautious around him, even if she *still* couldn't bring herself not to sass him at times; he just made it too easy.

"And you just *naturally* speak of your work?"

"I worked with her for years, Master." Trying to keep her tone conversational, if not neutral, Asajj strove for reasonable. For all Vader's faults, he *could* be reasonable when she wasn't challenging him. "Work is a natural topic."

"*Yours* is no longer her concern," Vader's eyes flashed, slightly golden as they narrowed. "Only mine."

"Yes, Master," Asajj ducked her head in a nod, struggling to keep her seething hatred of the man from bleeding into her tone. "Am I permitted to discuss the weather should she corner me again?"

"I don't care if you discuss the dress you want to be buried in," the sharpness in Vader's tone warned her to hold her tongue, "what you do for me is not up for discussion."

"Yes, Master."

There was a long pause where Asajj kept her eyes on the ground, gritting her teeth as she felt him assessing her sincerity. And she *was* sincere; if for no other reason than to escape this discussion as quickly as she could. Given the choice, she'd take her revenge and disappear. At the moment, it wasn't an option but Asajj would seize the opportunity if it ever came her way.

"Good. Now, tell me about our *guest*."

"He was transfer to the brig section for political prisoners upon my arrival." Lifting her head, she met his gaze, comfortable with the topic; at least, in this, she had nothing to hide. "He's listed as his latest identity; Kormar Edge."

"You're certain it's him, though?"

"Yes, my lord." Asajj had never been more certain; she'd worked too closely with the slicer for too long not to know him, no matter his cyber identity. "No one but you and I know his true identity. The only others who might identify him are your droid and your... wife."

Vader's jaw tightened noticeably at her subtle dig. "It should be a touching reunion then; what does he know?"

"He believes the lie that you killed her husband."

"For now." The smile on Vader's lips was as hard as the look in his eyes. "You've done well in capturing him, Ventress. Resupply; you'll be leaving on your next assignment in forty

eight hours.”

“Yes, my lord.” She turned to go, almost eager to escape him, already planning on how she might turn this to her advantage.

“And Ventress.”

She paused, looking back over her shoulder.

“Stay away from Padmé.”

“I will do nothing to actively engage her on-board ship, my lord,” she assured him. “If she speaks with me first, however, I can hardly offer offence by ignoring the Lady Vader.”

“Make every effort or you might find yourself joining your former colleague in the brig.”

A quick nod at Vader and Asajj made her escape. The corridors were uneventful and she reached her quarters without further interruptions. If she was leaving in forty eight hours, she would arrange everything she could from the safety of her quarters; her new assignment couldn’t come soon enough.

Locking the door behind her, she crossed the room and paused, her eyes drawn to the passive blinking lights of the comm. system on the desk.

A plan had slowly been building over her time on assignment, but the timing wasn’t right. No; if she was going to enact what she had in mind to escape Vader, she needed to find a way to break Padmé free of his protection. She needed full access to Padmé to be able to deliver on the promise she was prepared to make, and keep, in exchange for her safety and freedom.

That time wasn’t now.

Not yet.

Soon, perhaps, but not yet.

Focusing instead on what she would need to pack for essentials, as she had no idea where her next missions would take her, Asajj got to work. If, but some chance, an opportunity presented itself to act on her plan while she was on the *Exactor*, she was determined to take it.

Vader would *not* be her Master much longer.

Mid morning

Anakin was gone again when she woke, only this time, Padmé wasn’t surprised.

Disappointed and beyond furious, but not surprised. He’d never been one to meet their issues head on and, apparently, that was something that *hadn’t* changed. Not that it would help; she’d pin him down to talk eventually and, once she did, she was determined to get some answers.

What he likely didn’t realize was that his actions were slowly solidifying her fears, leading her to believe that he had something to hide... and his words the night before hadn’t helped.

A visitor?

What visitor?

No one knew she was there, and those that *had* known where she was going were currently on board the *Exactor*; most of the Galaxy still thought she'd died twenty six... twenty *seven* months ago. Who their mysterious visitor could be, she couldn't even *begin* to fathom.

The ship lurched as she was stepping out of the 'fresher, brushing her hair and ready for the day; the familiar feel of slipping into hyperspace making her stomach drop.

"Mistress Padmé?"

"Yes, Threepio?"

"Will you eat something today, Mistress?"

Her stomach twisted and then growled, letting her know that skipping her meals the day before hadn't been appreciated. Despite the hunger pang, the thought of food was an unappealing one. Still, she knew she should eat; it wouldn't do to go into battle with Anakin on an empty stomach. At the very least, she knew he wasn't above using it as a method of distraction, at worst he would use it as ammunition to avoid *upsetting* her. "Something simple, Threepio."

"Oh! How wonderful! I will begin its preparation immediately!"

"Thank you, Threepio," if nothing else it would keep him occupied. "Where's Anakin this morning?"

"Called away very early, Mistress." He answered, sounding almost sad about it.

At least one of them was. If she knew Anakin, he'd jumped at the opportunity to avoid their discussion. "Did he say why?"

"No, Mistress." The droid paused, sounding almost hesitant when he continued. "Would you like me to contact him?"

"No. Thank you, Threepio; I'll contact him myself."

"Yes, Mistress Padmé."

Padmé headed into the lounge, but didn't settle on the sofa as had been her habit for these many months. Instead, she looked around for Artoo and frowned when she didn't see him at the charging station. "Where's Artoo, Threepio?"

"He said something about the hangar bay, Mistress."

"He didn't go with Anakin?"

"Lord Vader was gone before we finished our charging cycle, Mistress. He left not long before you woke up."

Interesting. Was Artoo avoiding her too? Padmé's frown deepened. "Thank you, Threepio."

Ignoring his reply, she stepped across the room to her terminal and keyed in the code for calling the droid. Normally she'd use a hand comm. but she'd never had hers returned. The droid toodled a query as it connected.

“It’s Padmé, Artoo. Are you busy?”

He replied with a negative and what she presumed was an explanation; all she caught was something about reviewing upgrades on a fighter.

“I need you back here.”

There was silence for a long moment and then a sound almost like a suffering sigh before he toodled an affirmative.

“Thanks, Artoo.” Clicking off the comm., Padmé contemplated calling Anakin and decided swiftly against it.

If Artoo would get her into Anakin’s office before his return, she could try and break in to search his database about the planets Asajj had mentioned. The longer she went without speaking with Anakin about it, the heavier the stone in the pit of her stomach sat. If he was avoiding her and the conversation around it, she’d do a little digging on her own. Now she just had to convince the droid to help her; he was, she thought ruefully, loyal to a fault to Anakin.

Aside from researching the planet, she was also hoping to dig into his research on the twins. Their last several leads had been good ones and, she could access his files, maybe, just maybe, she could put some pieces together that he’d missed. That he hadn’t yet trusted her to look at his research alone while he was working was, no doubt, an oversight — at least, she *hoped* it was an oversight.

She didn’t want to even *consider* the implications if it wasn’t.

Stepping back to the viewport, she contemplated the starlines beyond. They’d entered hyperspace for a destination unknown, leaving Alderaan behind. Part of her was relieved; there was less of a chance of Bail finding out her location when she wasn’t in orbit about his planet. Waiting patiently for Artoo to return, her mind turned back to the *whys* of Anakin’s avoidance the night before.

He’d distracted her and she’d let him.

What that said about *her* was only slightly less disturbing than the tactics he’d used. Turning her desires against her, he’d played her like an instrument. Not that she normally minded, Anakin was an attentive lover and always had been, but she’d been determined to speak with him. A frown made its way onto her face as she considered *his* reactions before he’d set about distracting her.

Anakin had been on edge, not frustrated, but... almost angry.

When she’d tried to speak with him about her conversation with the Force Adept, he’d immediately jumped to conclusions and spoken of this mystery visitor Asajj had returned with. As if the other woman would have confided in her. No, Asajj had been trying to drive a wedge between them and—

Padmé rubbed her hands over her face in frustration.

Asajj had succeeded.

For all she'd allowed Anakin to distract her the night before, and she was under *no* illusions that she'd left him do just that, instead of force the issue. Now, after a relatively good night's sleep, the doubt of that conversations had returned full force. Anakin had refused to speak of the planets and, unless he refuted her suspicions, it was as good as an admission of guilt.

Could he have done it?

She *hoped* not. Many of the Jedi she'd assisted into hiding had been people he'd known and Jedi he'd worked with. Despite all the rumors she'd heard before coming to be with Anakin again, part of her had never believed him capable of the atrocities he'd been accused of; despite the fact he'd taken his revenge on the Sand People for his mother's death, he'd been remorseful about it.

Oh, he'd said otherwise, but no one she had ever met *cried* about doing something they didn't regret with such ferocity. Anakin had always been passionate, especially when it came to the safety of those he loved.

He might not have loved the Jedi, she'd heard enough about his restrictions over their years together to know he'd chaffed at them and used the Jedi as a means to an end, but he wasn't a *monster*. He had *been* a Jedi; a keeper of the peace. Even at the height of the Clone War, Anakin had remained a protector and champion of the innocent.

Until Empire day; until the Jedi purge and attack on the Jedi temple.

Padmé flinched as she faced the thought head on, acknowledging that Anakin *had been* capable of what Asajj accused him of. She didn't want to believe it was still possible, but no matter how *badly* she wanted to believe otherwise, she knew the truth. She *knew* he'd been capable of killing innocents if given the right motivation and saving *her* had always been justification for his actions; no matter the action.

She shivered, rubbing her hands over her arms as chill-bumps spread across her skin, spreading from a chill inside her outwards.

"Mistress Padmé."

She turned from the viewport and her dark thoughts, suddenly grateful for Threepio's interruption. "Yes, Threepio?"

"Your meal is ready, Mistress."

"I'll be right there."

Artoo returned to the suite while Padmé was eating and emphatically refused her request as she made it over breakfast, telling her that she should be asking her husband for access. Padmé had been unimpressed, demanding to know *when* she was going to ask when Anakin seemed determined not to spend any time with her outside the bedroom. Artoo had remained firm, leaving her to a day of re-exploring their living space for anything that might give her a clue to gain access.

Knowing it was futile, for it was a search she'd conducted several times, it still gave her a place to occupy her thoughts, a place to *focus*, instead of on Anakin and his behavior. Until she could catch him for a discussion, nothing good was going to come of her mind spinning

in circles. Instead, she was determined to gain access to his private database to see what information there was on his search for the twins.

Artoo returned to his project and Threepio ensured she ate twice more, having no answer to her inquiry about Anakin's whereabouts.

The day passed, revealing nothing — as expected — in her search.

Anakin didn't return to their quarters that night and Padmé's frustration turned to ire; angry with him for abandoning her now that they were back on the ship. It was unwelcome whiplash after having him attentive and all to herself for several weeks, especially when all she'd asked for was his reassurance. His only contact was a brief message, relayed by one of her guards, that he was occupied with an unexpectedly urgent situation that couldn't be delegated.

The bed that night was cold; so cold she'd curled up on her sofa and stared at the holo of her children for comfort until sleep had claimed her for a fitful night of dreams.

Month Twenty Seven, Day 7 PEF

Author's Note: I feel obligated to mention that we're in the home stretch, ladies and gents.

Chapter 87

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Seven, Day Seven PEF

Early Morning

Komar Edge sat with his back against the wall of the small cell, his head tilted towards the ceiling as he focused on his breathing, silently running the possibilities of his escape through his mind and coming up shorter and shorter.

Much like his analysis of his capture: where had he gone wrong? How had he slipped up? Ever since Asajj had delivered her warning the day she'd taken Threepio, he'd sought to disappear, even more thoroughly than before. He'd swapped identities, changing them as needed over the course of days or weeks, always something new; something that wasn't like the identity before.

Illegals or upstanding citizen, he'd done well; no one *except* Asajj had known him or been able to trace him. Not that she'd had an easy time of it, but the point had been to become invisible to *her* as he'd known she might come for him. He'd failed and now... now he was on the *Exactor*, Vader's flag ship, waiting for the Master of the ship to appear to sentence him... or possibly execute him, if Asajj's previous warnings were to be believed.

The last three days had been the fulfilment of every dark promise Asajj had alluded to.

His muscles twitched uncontrollably from constantly seizing during electrical torture and his lungs burned from oxygen deprivation. His bones ached from the repeated and prolonged heavy atmospheric pressures he'd been exposed to. For all the tortures, for he could think of them as nothing else, he was never once asked a question; he'd been subjected to abuse and indignity, been served a ration that would have kept a child hungry and left in silence.

Utter silence.

Except for his own screams.

He'd seen no friendly face since Asajj had taken him prisoner from his station. He'd also not seen Vader face to face, though he'd seen a shadowed man watching his torture from the wings, perhaps even orchestrating it, but he'd never stepped into the light.

Never spoken.

As Komar sat in silence, he'd spent his days reviewing what he knew of Vader's rise to power and his relationship with Padmé. The time of quiet contemplation has given him time to review and remember pieces and snippets of conversations that didn't quite add up.

Padmé had spoken about her husband with fondness, describing a warrior of the people and a gentle soul who struggled to make the decisions he'd needed to balance their secret relationship. Threepio's insistence that he'd been *created* by Padmé's husband, a man who had never *really* been referred to in the past tense by the droid; when her husband was spoken of at all. Then there was Asajj and her cryptic conversations. Things like how she'd never denied that she worked for Padmé's husband; a husband Vader was *supposed* to have killed. Or Asajj's repeated insistence that Padmé's husband was a powerful man; one who wanted *him* dead.

There was a very real possibility he'd been willfully blind to the hints dropped to him before and now that he was a prisoner, he was starting to suspect he'd made a terrible, terrible mistake in getting involved with Padmé. Her rebellion was worth fighting, but personally, Komar was starting to think involving himself with her beyond friendship hadn't been such a good idea. He'd been attracted to her, his ego flattered she'd turned to him to help her find solace for her grief.

He'd known from the start their relationship wasn't permanent, that he hadn't loved her as more than a friend, and certainly not the way she'd loved her husband, but he had respected her. Respect and mutual comfort hadn't been bad reasons to come together; not when they'd both lost people to the Clone Wars and the subsequent rise of the Empire.

If Asajj was correct, though, it left him with a conclusion he didn't want to think, let alone voice... and the certainty that every moment he continued to breathe was on borrowed time.

Searching databases she didn't have access to in the field, Asajj skimmed through line after line of reports on various insurgent activity reports, looking for anything that could be a hallmark of Obi-Wan Kenobi. The man had been one of her greatest frustrations, but also pleasures, through the clone wars. Yes, she wanted him dead, but there had been something about bantering with him that had set her blood humming in anticipation. Almost as if she enjoyed the banter as much as the fight... or possibly more. There was no denying that the man had been infuriating, but he'd also been worth of her respect.

Despite being the epitome of what a Jedi should be.

It made tracking him both a chore and a pleasure, searching for the small nuggets of information buried within layers of security reports. Few knew him as well as she did and, despite the fact that Vader had assigned her to the task months ago, she'd been sifting through reports ever since. What she'd found so far had been very little. Kenobi was too public of a figure to not have had his death announced which proved he hadn't died in the purge and he was too crafty and canny to have been eliminated by an explosive or sabotage. While he was listed as missing and presumed dead officially, Asajj knew it was just a way of the Empire saving face.

To have Kenobi, a hero of the Clone Wars, alive and well somewhere in the galaxy could have been used as a rallying cry for the rebels. And it was, to a degree, but the doubt the

Empire threw on his continued existence made it shaky ground to rally a group and most cells she was aware of had turned to the more solid foundation of fighting against oppression. That didn't mean Obi-Wan and the Jedi weren't used to inspire, it just meant their memory were used strategically.

It was searching through these reports, of Jedi being used as rallying points, where she'd found her first clues. A mention of *The Negotiator* endorsing an action had caught her attention, but it wasn't the mention that had led her to believe in Obi-Wan's involvement; it was the way the group had completed their mission. If Obi-Wan hadn't been present, he had certainly had a hand in the planning of the careful strategy and negotiation used to accomplish their objective and walk away with enough fuel and munitions to stock a small base with minimal casualties and not a single one of them by-standards. If Obi-Wan hadn't been a part of it, Asajj would pay good credits to know who was capable of mimicking his method of operation.

The hours passed as the night slowly turning into morning, but Asajj only took long enough breaks to stretch, use the facilities and hydrate, determined to find Obi-Wan and present him to Vader's Master in exchange for her own continued, and solitary, existence. If that was possible.

So she toiled. Not for her Master, but for herself and the freedom just beyond her grasp.

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Seven, Day Seven PEF

Late Morning

Padmé was left to her own devices, anger burning like acid in her gut, while Threepio played her personal chef, for two more days.

The ship finally dropped out of hyperspace in a section of space that brought no planet to the viewport. Either they'd come out of hyperspace in dead space, or the ship was on the outer reaches of the solar system; whatever solar system that happened to be. It left her with no view and more questions than answers. Where were they? Why were they there? Was Anakin stopping somewhere remote and looking for Luke and Leia or was this a completely unrelated stop? Not knowing, especially after being *ignored* for days, was like having a thermal detonator on a dead man's switch tied to her temper.

Anakin returned to their suite late morning and, as the door opened, Padmé lost her grip on the switch.

"Three *days*, Anakin?"

"Not now, Padmé."

"If not now, then *when*, Anakin? Later tonight before you abandon me again? Tomorrow morning before you sneak out like a thief?" She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. "How *dare* you give me a perfect month with you only to bring me back to *this*!"

"This?" he returned her glare, his eyes narrowing as he stalked across the room towards her. "This is my— *our* life, Padmé! This is what keeps you safe from the assassins and bounty hunters who would deliver your head to the Emperor!"

"I was perfectly fine where I was until you selfishly stole me out of obscurity!"

"Forgive me for wanting my *wife* with me, where she belongs, when I learned that she wasn't *dead*!" His breathing was rough and, visibly, he took a deep breath and stopped himself, which only made her madder. "I didn't come here to fight with you, Padmé."

"Get enough of that from Asajj, do you?" she snapped. "I don't appreciate being *used*, Anakin."

"Used?"

"I'm not here for your convenience; to be taken out of storage when you're *bored* only to be put away when you have better things to do! I *refuse* to be kept, Anakin!"

"Everything I do is to keep you safe, Padmé; *everything*," Anakin's eyes narrowed dangerously as he stopped right in front of her, "It would destroy me to lose you again; I can't go through that a second time!"

"You can't protect me, Anakin; if you lock me up here with you, you'll lose me as surely as if I died! Why can't you see that this is killing me — killing *us*?"

His hands slid into her hair, cradling her face within his palms and Padmé could feel his hands shaking. "No."

"I can't live like this Anakin." Padmé tore herself from his grip, moving around him and backing away. She wouldn't let him influence her with his touch. "I can't just sit back and let you search for Luke and Leia without me. I *can't* be kept in the dark about what's happening, about what you're doing. I can't—" Shaking her head, she hardened her resolve. "I *won't* go back to how things were when you first brought me here; either you trust me or you don't."

"Padmé—"

"No, Anakin."

"If you'd just—" His tone of voice was sweet, honeyed as he was trying to charm her.

She refused to let him; not this time. "No."

"Yes," the charm dropped out of his voice. "You don't have a choice in this, Padmé. I can control what happens on this ship, but the moment your survival is positively confirmed, I can't protect you if you're away from me. This is your sanctuary, your fortress—"

"This is my jail, my cell! Why not just put me in the detention level with the rest of the criminals?"

"You're my *wife*!" Anakin practically roared the words, grabbing her by the shoulders and giving her a hard enough shake her teeth rattled. "This isn't a prison, Padmé and I'm *not* your jailer."

"You weren't on Dandoran," toe-to-toe, she spat the words at him. "On Dandoran we could just be us, Anakin; we could do things with each other or by ourselves. We were *free* and we were us!"

"We're still us, Angel," Anakin's grip gentled, the lightning change in his emotions draining the tint of gold from his irises. "We've never been *more* us. I know Dandoran was

paradise and I swear we'll go back soon—"

"Will we?" Padmé wasn't so sure. "At what cost, Anakin?"

"We'll find a way."

"I can't live like this!"

"It's only for a little while—"

"No, Anakin." Padmé stepped out of his hold and crossed her arms over her chest. "I need more than just promises and impassioned speeches. I need *proof*. I can't be kept in your rooms for months on end with promises of pretty vacations. I *won't*."

"There's nothing I can do about it right now."

"I'm not asking you to take me with you when you go wherever you need to go. Just let me help; let me help find the twins!"

"It's too dangerous."

"Then let me search your database."

"I can't give you that access, Padmé."

"Why not? Are you afraid of what I might find, what I might see?"

His lips flattened in a firm line and he looked away, towards the viewport, without answering her.

"Don't you trust me, Anakin?"

"Of course I do," his gaze shot back to hers. "But someone digging through that database from my office is going to raise flags, especially if I'm elsewhere at the time."

"Then give me the files you've received and I'll go through them on a datapad." Frustration colored her words. "Let me help, Anakin!"

He rubbed his hands over his face. "I'll think of a way for you to help, but in the morning."

"Anakin—"

"I *said* I'd think of a way for you to help in the morning, Padmé," Anakin told her firmly, exhaustion coloring his words as he turned his back on her and headed towards the bedroom. "I haven't slept in two days; I can't do this right now."

Padmé let out a frustrated growl and stomped away to the main door, certain that, despite his words, he would find a way to make sure she didn't have access to anything.

"Where are you going?"

"Out!" she snapped the words at him and exaggerated a bow. "Is that acceptable to you?"

"Ventress is still on the ship, Padmé. You shouldn't be wandering around without an escort until after she leaves."

Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to ask since he wasn't offering the information. "And *when* would that be?"

“Later tonight.”

“Asajj won’t hurt me. She’s too scared of *you*.”

“Padmé—”

“You said I was safe on your ship; that you could *keep* me safe here, right?”

“That’s not what—”

“Either I’m safe or I’m not, Anakin.”

“You’re deliberately twisting my words.”

“As you’ve twisted mine since I got here! I need to get out of this room, Anakin. You’ve told me I’m not a prisoner and I’m going to hold you to that.”

His response was predictable and he didn’t disappoint her. “Then I’ll come with—”

“*Alone*, Anakin.”

His jaw tightened and his whole body seemed to tense, his eye burning with what she was sure was the urge to order her not to. He took a single step towards her before he seemed to catch himself and stopped. He exhaled on a long breath, as if he could expel all of his frustration in that long sigh. “Fine. At least take a guard.”

“Your concern has been noted, *husband*,” her tone was frosty and she knew it; she needed to get away from him, “and I will be cautious. Sleep well.”

Closing the door behind her and ignoring his protests, Padmé strode away from with with barely a glance either way. Asajj would not be so close to their quarters; Anakin would have ensured it. Leaving the door behind her, she broke into a run, needing a release for the pent up energy that had been festering for days. Her confrontation with Anakin had done little to alleviate it and only made the weight on her heart heavier. She’d spent days stewing over their argument and, after what she only call a colossal failure, she had to admit the truth.

He wouldn’t let her help.

Even now, after all this time, he was determined to keep her away from the search for Luke and Leia. To keep her away from anything that didn’t involve *him* and their room. She’d been foolish to hope that Dandoran changed anything. When they’d been flying and fighting on the *Angel*, it had felt like they were back during the Clone Wars. They’d been equals again, on equal footing and she’d been able to breathe, to *be*, and she’d gloried in it. It had given her a chance to remind him of just how *strong* she was, even without the Force. Yet, it hadn’t mattered.

None of it mattered.

Now that they were back on the *Exactor*, he was once again distant, almost unreachable and so overly protective, so *smothering* she couldn’t breathe again. Anakin’s concern, his secrecy, for all she had leave to use parts of the ship, she *knew* it would be foolish to go to the bridge, was crushing her under its weight. Few people knew of her presence and it had to stay that way for now. That didn’t change the fact that Anakin was doing *nothing* to make it easier

for her. With nothing to do, Padmé's thoughts had turned back towards the twins, desperately wondering what she'd missed, and she was in danger of falling back into the habits.

They'd been back for less than a week and already all of the good that time away had done was gone. The tension was back in her shoulders and she wasn't sleeping. Fortunately, Threepio insisted she ate, but Padmé knew it was a matter of time before she lost that too. Her feet pounding on the durasteel decks, she ran. She ran from her thoughts and her feelings. She ran from the confusion and frustration. From the anger and helplessness she'd been immersed in. Without thought, she climbs and slid up and down gangways in maintenance shafts, using the ship as her personal training facility.

She ran and she ran until, her heart pounded in her ears and her breath burned in her lungs. Until the corridors swam before her eyes and her feet felt like they were made of duracrete. And then she ran some more, huffing as she did, one hand pressed to the stitch in her side even as darkness encroached on the edges of her vision.

Padmé finally stopped, bending over to press her hands to her knees as she sucked great gasping breaths of air into her lungs and willing her last meal to stay where it was in her stomach. It took several minutes before the urge to be sick subsided and for the pounding of her heart to stop sounding in her ears. When she finally pushed herself to her full height, she stopped and stared at the sign on the door down the hall.

Hangar bay.

Her trek had taken down maintenance shafts and through back corridors to the maintenance side entrance of the hangar bay.

Putting her back to the wall, Padmé slid to the floor as she continued to catch her breath, bending her knees and stretching her arms above her as she opened her rib cage to better breathe. Her gaze stayed fixed on that sign. The hangar bay. Faint memories pushed to the surface of the map that Asajj had given her when she's tried to escape and the details she hadn't bothered to commit to memory. Or so she'd believed. How had she found her way back here? Closing her eyes she pushed the thought aside and focused instead on just *being*. Breathing.

In and out.

In and out.

In and—

Her eyes snapped open and refocused on the sign.

—out.

Pushing to her feet, Padmé reached for the room, using a nearby service ladder to extend her stretch as she considered her options. Anakin was back in their quarters and she had little desire to go find him. Before her was the hangar bay. Without Artoo to override the docking controls, she wouldn't be getting very far, but that didn't mean the bay was off limits. Striding to the doors, she slipped into the hangar bay and waited. The hour was late, but there was a watch on; fewer men at the moment than normal, but plenty of droids unloading cargo and sorting it for storage. It didn't stop her from looking about the bay and assessing the various landing pads. It was busy, focused on maintenance and logistic movements.

The *Angel* was nowhere to be seen, but she was aware it was currently parked in a private storage bay just out of her current view. Anakin had made sure she knew its location and the three layers of security it required to access it. Which left the *Angel* out of her reach. Her gaze skimmed over the other ships that were on the landing pads, frowning when she saw technicians and droids heading towards a ship she wasn't familiar with. Made of black durasteel and outfitted with armor plating, it was clearly more than a fighter and designed unlike most freighters she'd ever seen. Hatches for cargo and access were all open with technicians visible inside. Weapon ports were visible on three of the side panels and wiring was pouring from its belly. Sparks flew and droids chattered in arguments of which she could only hear faint echoes of.

Asajj's ship?

Considering the rest of the ships in the hangar bay, and knowing the Adept was supposed to be leaving soon, it was likely. Only it didn't look like it was in good condition. More wires were pulled from the underbelly even as she watched and her heart sank like a stone. Asajj wouldn't be going anywhere anytime soon if that was her ship. And Anakin would only tighten his grip around her in an attempt to keep her safe.

Having seen enough, Padmé returned to the service corridor and began retracing her steps. If, for some reason, she ever needed to come back this way, she was going to consciously remember how. By the time Padmé returned to the suite she shared with Anakin, she was exhausted but in the best of ways.

At almost dinner time, she entered the suite to find that Anakin was still sleeping. Threepio was cooking and Artoo was nowhere to be seen.

Without so much as a hello to the protocol droid, Padmé made straight for the couch and the datapads kept near it. a quick search provided an unused data disc and she wasted no time in pulling up a blank file. Painstakingly, she started recording the way to the docking bay and all the various back passages. That knowledge would be put to good use, but it first had to be recorded and saved. She was under no illusion Vader would eventually find the file and used a cipher to ensure what he'd be reading, if he opened it, wouldn't look anything like directions.

Padmé didn't hear the comm. when it sounded almost an hour later and, when Anakin came storming out of the bedroom. Focused as she was, she didn't so much as lift her head when he stopped by the living area and stood at the other end of the sofa, looking at her.

Ignoring him, for she had better things to do that cater to his bad mood, she didn't stop her typing.

Vader's tone when he spoke was curt. "I've been summoned to the bridge, Padmé. I don't know how long this will take."

Lifting one hand to acknowledge his goodbye, she didn't so much as lift her gaze to see him off as he turned away. The door opening, and then sliding shut behind him, was the only sound beyond Threepio in the kitchenette, leaving Padmé with the droids and the start of her new map.

About twenty minutes later, Threepio interrupted her. "Mistress Padmé?"

She lifted her head. "Yes, Threepio?"

“Supper is ready, Mistress? Will you not have something to eat?”

Opening her mouth to reject the offer, her stomach clenched in protest and gave her pause. She’d exerted herself considerably and if she wanted to maintain her strength to resist Anakin’s smothering, she was going to need to stay focused and fed. Putting the datapad aside, she smiled at Threepio. “I think I will, Threepio. Thank you.”

“Thank the Maker! I am so relieved, Mistress. I thought you would be adopting your minimal eating habits after the events of these past few days.”

“I’ve not given up on the twins or Anakin, Threepio.” Padmé pushed to her feet as she spoke, even as she wondered if she was trying to convince herself or the droid of the latter. “I know what he’s doing and why. I also now that he thinks it’s what’s best, but I refuse to be kept in a cage. You’ve been with me a long time, at what point have I *ever* let myself be kept?”

“Never, Mistress.” Threepio sounded pleased, if nervous. “I do not think the Master will like what you have planned.”

“Does he ever?” Padmé chuckled darkly as she stepped into the kitchenette and busied herself in collecting a bowl of stew and some of the freshly baked bread Threepio had been working on. “You’ve gotten better at this, Threepio.”

“If my efforts will entice you to eat, my lady, then I would download every cooking program and book in the galaxy.”

Laughing softly, and ever grateful for Threepio’s company, Padmé settled at the table to eat. “Thank you, Threepio. You really are my most loyal friend.”

He tittered, at a loss for words, and puttered about the kitchen cleaning up. She had a second helping and then returned almost immediately to her work as Threepio went to the charging station. If nothing else, her project and committing it to memory even as she drafted it in cipher it would keep her sharp and give her something to do besides sit and reflect.

Anakin, once again, did not return to the suite that night.

As Padmé continued to work on detailing everything she’d seen, she was grateful for his absence. He wouldn’t want her to have a map and if he didn’t want her to have it, then it was all the more reason she should, ciphered or not. Later, once her map was completed and locked away, the thought came flooding back as she closed her eyes to sleep. Things were changing and not, it seemed, for the better; slowly, now that they were back on the *Executor*, Anakin was falling into old habits and being buried under his responsibilities, once again disappearing into his role of enforcer.

Disappearing, much as the sweet boy she’d known on Tatooine and Naboo had disappeared into the Jedi order.

The memories were too much and left her overwhelmed by times that had been difficult in their own right, but were now cherished bittersweet memories. Tired and worn out, she consciously pushed them away... and they followed her into restless dreams.

Month Twenty Seven, Day 10 & 11 PEF

Author's Note: Completing this was my NANO project for 2020; I was determined to finish it this year — and I almost did. It's been twelve years since I started it and it's about time; with scheduled writing time every Sunday, it means I've been adding to it little by little, week after week and I have several chapters written and edited over the last several weeks, except for the last two, including the epilogue — but they *are* scripted and outlined.

Thanks to everyone for sticking with me thus far; it's been a hell of a dozen years and the ride to the end is going to be a wild one.

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 88

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Seven, Day Ten PEF

Unexpected mechanical complications on her ship postponed Asajj's departure, leaving her stranded on *Exactor* until the mechanics completed their diagnostics and, determined to keep out of Vader's way, she spent her time almost exclusively in her quarters.

Research and meditation carried her through the first couple of days, allowing her to center herself. Reaching her senses to the rest of the ship had shown cracks in the command structure; doubt was ebbing into the feelings of the command crew. Vader's presence remained a volatile and passionate maelstrom, as always. Around him, Asajj had felt Padmé's frustration; the anger and hurt driving the determination that had made her the compelling leader of their Rebel cell.

The cracks were there too.

Padmé and Vader were fracturing, slowly and Asajj knew they needed but a budge in the right direction to completely shatter.

It drove her to further her research, knowing that if she were able to present Obi-Wan's capture to Padmé, it would sunder them completely when Vader accomplish his goal of eliminating his old Master.

On day three, Asajj checked her preparations for her next mission, silently seething inside. As much as she wanted to get away and start on her next assignment, she also was loathe to pass up the opportunity that Padmé and Vader had presented her. Padmé would run, of that Asajj had no doubt, it was simply a matter of time now. She'd planted the seeds and seen them grow; Padmé was Vader's weakness, always had been, and if she was going to strike a blow against one, the other was the way to do it.

With Obi-Wan's capture a distant dream, for she hadn't been able to find much on his whereabouts, she turned to other options that might be viable and were closer at hand. Vader, she knew, hadn't told Padmé about the guest in their holding cell. He was still alive, so Asajj

could only guess that Vader had plans for him that hadn't yet materialized. They'd entered hyperspace and were transiting to Naboo, though for what reason Asajj could only guess.

Vader hadn't been forthcoming in his terse message the evening before, telling her that the major mechanical issue on her ship wasn't likely to be fixed and she would be joining them on a brief stop over. Her assignment on the planet was to engage a small cell of known Jedi sympathizers and eliminate them as Vader spoke with the Queen. Easy enough since there were no Jedi known to be on the planet, but Asajj was wary. It felt like a trap and, when she'd said as much, Vader had cut the comm. line.

Which meant it *was* a trap.

So Asajj prepared herself for a landing that would be fought with peril, but peril she understood. As an experienced infiltrator, springing the trap *her way* was going to be fun. Preparing her blades, she took the opportunity to do an in-depth maintenance check and cleaning. Transit to Naboo would take the better part of the day and so Asajj took her time, disassembling the blades and cleaning each part with both a soft cloth and carbon scoring tools until they shone once more like new. And while the paired blades were a reminder of her current chains, she couldn't fault their craftsmanship. Her Master, if nothing else, was a superior craftsman when it came to lightsabers.

She was left alone, the way she preferred it, allowing her to slip into a Force trance as she worked.

The ship around her came to life, with doubt and certainty warring with fear and awe. She rode the emotional currents, feeding off the negative emotions and allowing their strength to calm and energize her. Vader's Force signature was brilliant and she shied away from it, not wanting to touch him even in that state if she didn't have to. He would know and she had no desire to tempt fate. She'd kept her word and stayed away from Padmé, for now, and Vader in turn had let her be.

However, once planet side, that had the possibility to change.

If Padmé learned of their destination and decided to escape the clutches of her *darling* husband, Naboo would be the perfect place for her to do so. Not only did Padmé know the planet but it was the one place Asajj suspected that Vader would be reluctant to pursue her with the methods he'd used to date. Especially once the populace knew that their beloved Senator Amidala was not dead as she'd been claimed to be.

Floating in the Force induced trance, Asajj focused her consciousness back on herself and the task at hand.

Whatever happened on Naboo would happen and *if* she was given a chance to eliminate the Lady Vader, she would gladly take it. For now, she would simply let the Force guide her on her yet-unseen path, confident that it would take shape before her and she would not hesitate when it did.

"Mistress Padmé?"

Not looking up from the data pad she was using to review her map, she still smiled for him. "Yes, Threepio, what is it?"

"There is a message for you, my Lady, from the Master."

A frown replaced the smile on her lips. "*A message?*"

"Yes, my Lady. He says he needs to speak with you about our next hyperspace destination."

"And he can't come back here to do so?"

"He has asked that you meet him in the training salle."

"No."

Threepio visibly jerked. "My Lady?"

"My answer is no, Threepio. I won't be sent for when he has a moment of time for me. If he can't come to see me here, I refuse to meet him at his convenience. You can call and *message* him that."

"Oh dear. He will not like this, Mistress."

"Good." Padmé turned back to her reading, made a change on an error she found and then locked the data disc, before removing it from the datapad. Anakin would likely come straight to her with his displeasure and she wasn't going to take the chance of him finding her map just yet. Replacing it with one of the novels he'd supplied to her months ago, Padmé placed the player on the table and pushed up from the sofa to go stand at the viewport. She planned to meet him head on and, *when* he returned to their suite, she was going to do just that. She was sick of being ignored and he was going to know it.

True to form, Anakin stormed back into their quarters less than ten minutes later. "Padmé!"

She turned from the viewport and promptly reminded herself to keep her eyes on his face and not on the sweat glistened muscles of his partly exposed chest. Clearly he'd been training. "Anakin."

"I know what you're doing and it needs to stop now. I don't have time for these games."

"Games? Really?"

"I asked that you join me in the training salle for a reason. You're refusing just to spite me!"

"I'm refusing because I'm not at your beck and call, Anakin. I'm not one of your troops, in case you've forgotten."

He paused as he approached her, his gaze narrowing at her even and controlled tone. "You're... considerably more calm about this than I expected."

And she was. Compared to the last time she'd confronted him and practically jumped down his throat, Padmé knew her calm demeanor would throw him off. It was why she'd chosen to approach this discussion rationally. Anakin needed to know he couldn't call and

expect her to come; she wasn't a pet to be showered with attention, or ignored, at his convenience. "Shouting has gotten me nowhere," she told him evenly. "I'm hoping that approaching this with a level head will get my frustration through to you."

Anakin cocked his head at her. "I know you don't like being stuck in our suite, Padmé, but I promise it's only temporary."

"So you keep saying." She counted back in her mind from five. "I don't see any proof of that."

"I can't give you proof," he sighed, running a hand through his hair and giving it a shake. "Especially not now."

"Why not? I'm not asking for much, Anakin; just a little freedom."

"That freedom could get you killed if the wrong person sees you, Padmé. I haven't spent the last few months trying to win you back only to lose you now."

She exhaled, wanting to tell him that he was close to losing her regardless, but it wasn't the discussion for it; that would come later. "You can't protect me forever, Anakin. I'm always going to be in danger. Be it from the Empire and the Emperor who want me dead and have put a price on my head, or from the bad wiring on a repair that makes the landing gear on my starship fail. I could even fall down a flight of stairs, if we're ever somewhere that has them again."

"Not if I can help it."

"My *point*," she told him evenly, "is that you *can't* protect me from life. I've been protecting myself for a long time. I just need you to trust me; to recognize that I *can* take care of myself."

"I didn't come here to debate if you can take care of yourself, Padmé; I *know* you can, in a variety of circumstances. It's one of the things that made me fall in love with you," he flashed her a boyish smile that quickly disappeared. He examined her for a moment. "The reason I asked you to come and see me is that I wanted to let you know we're headed for Naboo."

Her stomach clenched and the room swam for a moment as she took in his words, the images of her family spinning around in her mind's eye. Family that thought her dead; family that was incomplete with Luke and Leia still missing. "No."

"No... what?"

"I'm not going to the surface, Anakin. I *can't*."

"I wasn't going to ask you too."

Padmé registered the confused relief in his expression and understanding dawned belatedly. He'd been prepared to fight her on this, thinking she would *want* to go to the surface. "Then why did you want to talk to me about it?"

"I... thought I was going to have to talk you *out* of wanting to visit."

"They think I'm dead, Anakin. And for all intents and purposes, I *am* until I can locate Luke and Leia." Padmé gave a shake of her head and wrapped her arms about her middle,

trying to fight the feeling of frustrated helplessness that was swift and fierce in its return. “I *refuse* to set foot on Naboo again until I have them safely in my arms to make the trip and meet their grandparents.”

“Padmé—”

“Why are you going?”

“The government is in a state of flux,” he paused, and Padmé could see him choosing his words carefully. “I’m going to *remind* the new Queen and her cabinet where their loyalties should lie.”

Padmé needed nothing more to understand the purpose of their trip. Reading between the lines, she could see that the Queen and her cabinet were openly questioning the Emperor and his policies. She’d seen the start of it before her capture and silently applauded the young woman on the throne; following your principles was never easy, especially in the face of such power. Disappointed though she was, she couldn’t help but admire the Emperor’s shrewd choice. To send Anakin, once the savior of Naboo, to speak with the Queen and her cabinet, was political genius. “If you didn’t want me to go, why bring it up, Anakin?”

“I’m not so thick to think you won’t recognize Naboo from orbit the moment we enter it, Padmé.”

“Good.” She swallowed hard. “Do you know how long we’ll be there?”

“If everything goes according to plan, no more than a couple of days. I swear to you that we won’t stay any longer than absolutely necessary.”

“Thank you, Anakin.” Waving her hand at his chest, she arched an eyebrow. “If there’s nothing else, should I let you get back to your work out?”

“I’m rather enjoying this part of it,” he returned flirtatiously, taking a step towards her; a step that could only be described as stalking. “It’s the first time we’ve had a real conversation since we got back from Dandoran.”

“Don’t mistake civility for acceptance, Skywalker,” Padmé shot back immediately, taking up a fighting stance. She refused to let him charm her, especially before they’d had a chance to completely discuss her concerns and get some real answers. “I fully expect you to answer my questions about Lianna, Umgal, Belkaden, Balmorra and Eridau. I know you don’t want to talk about them, you’ve been dodging me ever since I brought them up. Are you ready to answer my questions?”

Her words stopped him cold and there was a faint yellow tint to his ice blues as he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. It was gone when he looked at her again. “I can’t explain right now, Padmé. Isn’t that enough?”

“No. No it’s not, Anakin. I told you I wanted to be treated as an equal and not a bird in a cage. You’ve promised I’m not, but you give me no reason to believe you. Until you can explain why you’ve pushed me away and what Asajj meant by listing the names of these planets, I can’t think of this room, of this suite, as anything *but* a cage. You’re still trying to protect me. You can’t protect me from the truth.”

“It’s more complicated than than I can’t go into it right now.”

“And the visitor Asajj mentioned? Can you talk about them?”

“Soon,” he promised, turning away and heading back to the main door of the suite. “I promise, Padmé, once we’re done at Naboo, I’ll be able to answer your questions.”

“I’m going to hold you to that, Anakin.”

Pausing before opening the door, he glanced back at her, his expression completely unreadable. He then left without another word.

Padmé watched the door close and returned to her sofa, curling up in the corner and pulling a pillow to her chest in an effort to stop the trembling of her limbs. Ducking her head she pressed her lips to the pillow and, taking a deep breath, screamed.

Naboo — Month Twenty Seven, Day Ten PEF

Late Afternoon

The transition to Naboo was about as eventful as any hyperspace trip.

Asajj reported to the hangar bay, dressed in the borrowed scout kit she’d been instructed to wear, her regular clothes and her lightsabers tucked discreetly beneath the armor at the small of her back. Once they’d landed, she’d split off from the group to search for the cell after Vader’s address to the Queen. Vader’s honor guards was waiting at the foot of the Lambda class shuttle that would be taking them to the surface, clearly waiting for their Master. Asajj bypassed the line from behind and took up the empty position near the ramp.

Vader appeared, dressed in what Asajj had taken to calling his war-look in her mind. His clothes were those of the Republic hero he’d once been. She could only *imagine* what Padmé had thought of seeing him dressed that way once again and it was all she could do to prevent a smile that the thought of the fight that surely had ensued. Padmé wouldn’t have wanted him to appear before the Nabooian Queen in such garb, of that she was certain, but Asajj was also certain Padmé would understand the move for what it was.

Vader was going to remind the Nabooian monarchy what they owed *him* as their savior from the Trade Federation embargoes and the Blue Shadow Virus and use it as leverage to bring them in line with the Empire’s directives.

The image of him striding towards the troops was so reminiscent of their clashes during the Clone Wars, complete with Artoo trundling along just behind him, that Asajj had to stop herself from looking around for Obi-Wan as a shiver of dread ripped down her spine. The man striding confidently towards the shuttle was everything the Hero with no Fear had always been. And while Asajj well understood the illusion for what it was, Vader’s approach to the shuttle was almost nostalgic. Until she’d been forced to serve him, she’d never completely understood how much wickedness his charming and handsome façade had concealed.

Striding across the deck, Vader stopped as the troops snapped to attention and then slowly stepped forward to inspect them. Asajj followed their example, knowing he’d see through her disguise, but also that it was necessary for their plans. When Vader reached her, he paused,

nodded once, and then continued into the shuttle. The head of the detachment broke formation. "About face!"

As one, the line turned, Asajj with it.

"Forward, march!"

And, just like that, they marched into the ship. The military precision ended there as the troopers took their places, Asajj making her way to the cockpit as she was Vader's copilot. He didn't so much as glance her way as he was flipping the switches for the pre-flight check.

"Artoo, systems check."

The droid toodled from his place at the secondary controls and then whistled affirmative noises back to Vader as Vader began running through the systems. Asajj was happy to be ignored as she quickly went through the secondary systems check, cross checking her numbers as Vader and the droid completed theirs. A quick check of the safety controls showed the troopers in the back had secured themselves in, confirmed with a visual inspection via camera.

"Secondary systems?"

"Green."

Vader flipped the toggle for closing the access ramp and then the engines fired to life even as he flipped on the comm. "Tower, this is Shuttle 2214518 requesting departure clearance."

"Shuttle 2214518, *this is Tower. You're cleared for departure pending a status check.*"

"Status is five by five, Tower. Departure confirmed."

"The bay doors are open and the pattern is clear. Happy hunting, sir."

Shutting off the comm. Vader adjusted the controls and the shuttle lifted off the platform without any of the usual grace of Vader's other vehicles. Despite this, he handled it perfectly, using a firm touch on the controls to coax the engines to give just enough thrust to propel them slowly through the grav field and into space. Once free of gravity, the ugly duckling of a shuttle lost its awkwardness as Vader flipped her over and sent her straight towards the planet's atmosphere.

The trip to the surface was uneventful and quiet, to Asajj's relief, as Vader seemed focused on the task at hand and wasn't looking for idle chit chat. It suited her fine as she took the opportunity to review her tasks once on planet.

They landed on Naboo without incident, using the main plaza in front of the Theed Palace as a landing pad. A deliberate show of power in disregarding the city's direction to a designated landing pad. Vader was clearly here to make a statement and it wasn't just to the young Queen.

After assigning four of the troops to guard the ship, the other eight, which included Asajj in their number, took up their roles as honor guard. Staying with Vader's contingent, Asajj kept time with the troopers as they paraded behind Vader in a perfect march towards the Palace. She did nothing to draw attention to herself at the back of the column, her paces in time with the other three scout troopers. Troopers, she knew, that weren't actually troopers;

they were clones from the clones wars who remained loyal to their former General. Vader's reminder to *her* that she wasn't his only asset on planet.

They arrived at the base of the palace steps to growing and swelling crowds lining the streets to watch the procession. Vader's droid was with him as they marched, the flair of their arrival having drawn the people out in droves. Some cheered upon seeing him and Vader lifted his hand to wave, flashing an almost boyish smile to those as the cheering increased. A chant began among the people as they realized that the Hero of their planet had returned. No matter, it seemed, that he had returned with an honor guard of troops, his very presence seemed to lift the spirits of the people.

It was with that flair they arrived at the base of the stairs. Queen Apailana and her handmaidens and honor guard stepped out from the building as Vader climbed the first five steps and then turned to the crowd, raising his arms with a wave and a salute. The wind tousled his long hair, the sunlight striking his handsome face and illuminating his charming smile. Asajj watched with disdain as the people cheered and welcomed him. Her esteem of the people sank even further as Vader began to speak, amplifying his voice so it carried across the square.

"Good people of Naboo, I return to you today in triumph!" A deafening cheer followed and Vader laughed, visibly enjoying the adulation. "It is a triumph over instability and lawlessness. A triumph over inequality. As the home of our great leader, Naboo will reap the benefits of progress and industry for it is first among worlds and first among our allies. Good people, I bring you a message of continued hope and a promise of peace. Naboo will never again go unprotected, to be taken advantage of by those who would profit from your suffering. This is the Empire's promise and pledge to the people of Theed. This is *my* promise."

The wave of cheers that followed nearly had Asajj clapping her hands over her ears despite the helmet on her head. Clearly beloved by the people, Vader waved and smiled again before turning to resume his trek up the stairs. The troops and Asajj followed, taking up the honor guard positions at his back, Vader's steps continued to be cheered as he approached the Queen. When they finally reached her, he bowed formally to her, causing another wave of cheers for the visible sign of respect, but Asajj could see the tightness around the Queen's lips and the way her eyes flashed when Vader spoke to her and no one else could hear.

The Queen then turned and led the way into the palace, Vader falling into step beside her as her guards took up their formation around her. Asajj and the other scout troopers augmented that group as the other four troopers took up guard positions at the top of the stairs. The palace was much as the holo news had portrayed it, but Asajj refrained from looking around, despite it being her first visit to the Royal residence. Generally, when she'd been to Naboo, her travels had been to places less well appointed.

"You speak very prettily, Lord Vader," Queen Apailana told him as she settled into her throne. "And you appears to still hold sway in the hearts of the people."

"They well remember all that was done to secure their freedom, Queen Apailana; I am simply here to remind *you* of that."

"Your past actions years ago do not excuse the behavior of the Empire," one of her advisors snapped hotly. "The atrocities that is has committed in the name of peace are

appalling.”

Vader slanted the man a look out of the side of his eyes and Asajj could see the way the blue of his irises were starting to bleed into light green, on their way towards golden. “If you speak of the loss of your Senator Amidala, Advisor, know that I am searching for her murderer and I *will not rest* until they are dead.”

“That doesn’t give you the right—”

“It gives me the *only* right I need, Advisor.” Vader’s words were soft, lethally so. “An attack on a citizen of Naboo, especially such a prominent citizen and *hero*, is an attack on the Emperor himself. Naboo is his home planet, did you think this act would go without reprisal?”

The Advisor looked as if he was going to continue speaking, but the Queen broke in. “Lord Vader, we are well aware of our status as his home world. This *status* has cost us trading partners and there are complete systems who will no longer deal with us as a result. Many people are without work, their ships sitting idle on their launch pads, the social system is overwhelmed by requests for aid. The people are starving in outlying cities and towns. How would the Empire assist its people with these concerns?”

Asajj was not surprised by Vader’s reply, inwardly disgusted by the way the Queen had opened herself to it.

“The Empire is not entertaining local governance, Queen Apailana.” Asajj could hear the implied *not yet* in his words and she would wager good credits so could everyone in the room. “I can ensure that you are connected with all of our trading partners.”

“That is most gracious of you, Lord Vader.” the Queen inclined her head. “What will this information cost us?”

“I will have the names of the planets who refuse to trade with you. The situation must be addressed appropriately.”

“We will consider your most generous offer, my Lord.”

He chuckled. “It is not an offer, your Majesty; I *will* have the names of those who refuse to trade with you, one way or another.”

“Are you threatening me, Lord Vader?”

“Never, your Majesty,” his smile turned charming, his voice smooth, and Asajj recognized that he was starting to lose his patience. His mask had improved since she’d last seen him negotiate. “Simply informing you that your cooperation in this matter is not only appreciated but promptly expected for the good of the Nabooian people. How can I keep my promise to protect all of you if you will not give me the information I need to ensure a resumption of much needed commerce?”

“Names of new trading partners will suffice.”

“Those worlds who refuse to trade with you are guilty of treason, your Majesty. If they are not dealt swiftly, more might dare to cut ties with Naboo, leaving you in a much worse position than you are now.”

“They are entitled to their political opinions, Lord Vader; is that not the purpose of the Senate? Naboo has always stood for justice and peace; punishing them for observing the same values would be hypocritical and counter productive.” The Queen smiled and inclined her head, but Asajj could see there was no joy in either movement. “Naboo requires no assistance from the Emperor or the Empire; we are a hearty people and will find our own way. We will survive.”

“You’re making a mistake, your Majesty.”

“My only mistake, my Lord, was in thinking that the Empire would help without putting a price tag on it. Thank you for coming; my advisors and I will discuss your... offer. Good day, Lord Vader.”

Clearly dismissed, Vader bowed to the Queen. “I hope you’ll make the right decision, your Majesty. Emperor Palpatine would be very disappointed to hear that the people he holds closest to his heart chose to suffer instead of accept aid. Good day.”

Vader led the way out of the audience chamber, Artoo silently beside him, and Asajj watched, the last of the troopers to leave, as the advisors surrounded the Queen in a sudden clamor or noise.

Good bye, your Majesty, she thought wryly. Vader wasn’t one to be thwarted and Asajj was certain the Queen’s attitude would have dire consequences should she not fall in line with Vader’s instructions quickly. It wasn’t unknown for the Empire to dispose of leaders who were arrayed against them and, if Asajj was reading the young ruler right, she wasn’t going to cooperate.

A shame.

Asajj would regret having to kill her.

Vader led them back to the antechamber before the stairs and turned to her and the clones in the scout trooper armor. “You know what to do.”

They saluted without saying a word, and the people cheered as Vader appeared again, raising his hands in acknowledgement of their adulation. He started down the steps, and Asajj and her partner broke one way while the other pair of scout troopers went the other, along the outside of the stairs. They skirted the edges of the crowd as they reached the landing, Vader stopping to greet the people. With their attention firmly on their former savior, Asajj and her partner slipped around the outside, playing the part of a perimeter sweep. As they neared the shuttle, she slipped into one of the many alcoves along the wall, her partner taking up watch.

Within moments, she had shed the armor for the local garb hidden underneath, her lightsabers still firmly strapped to the small of her back, she emerged and joined a throng of people leaving the square. Listening to their comments, she was surprised to hear as many negative comments about Vader as positive. Naboo’s population, despite having welcomed him, had strong opinions as to how his career had evolved. She paid little attention to the snippets, only noted that those who appeared to be more well off, seemed more in step with his decisions.

Leaving the mass of people, Asajj worked her way to the outskirts of Theed. According to the information that Vader had provided her, a trap of a meeting had been set in the

wilderness just below the palace, just below the cloud line above the base of the falls. It would take her the better part of the rest of the afternoon to make the trip on foot, especially if she didn't want to be seen. Wasting no time, she planted her feet on the path and set her course.

Everything pointed that this was a trap, the information a little too convenient, and Vader sending her in his stead, was but one way to ensure the ruse was unsuccessful.

Darkness fell before she reached her destination, yet the lights of the city and Palace above along with the ambient reflections off the water lit her way. She didn't rush, aware that the meeting time was set for early morning, and instead evaluated as she went. The terrain was moist and covered in a sheen of water the lower she went, making the footing treacherous but the path necessary. Few would venture this way without some kind of vehicle, which would garner her the element of surprise.

All the more exciting if she was successful; it would give her prey no chance to defend themselves.

Night passed slowly as she descended into the near blindness of the cloud line, slipping once on the rocks and nearly going over the ledge, saved only by a jagged outcropping that tore into her left bicep. Blood flowed as she clutched the outcropping, staring into the nothingness below and suddenly began to wonder if she shouldn't have taken the chance on discovery with a vehicle and attempted the climb from the bottom up.

Too late now.

Catching her breath, she gritted her teeth as she pulled herself back to solid ground. Tearing a piece of cloth from her shirt, she took the time to bind the wound after examining it closely. Nothing to be done about it now and she didn't carry a medkit; it would have to wait until she returned to the *Exactor* or the shuttle. Using her teeth to ensure she had a firm knot, Asajj tested her range of motion to find a slight numbness in her fingers but nothing that was cause for concern in taking on a party of Rebels, no matter how well equipped.

Unless they had a Jedi.

Even then, Asajj was confident in her abilities; Jedi or no Jedi, the cell she was stalking would end tonight. Few true Jedi remained and those that did were more content to hide than take action. Those that *had* taken action were mostly dead. Stepping down to the next visible ledge, Asajj redoubled her caution and it paid off, the level of clouds clearing several feet later to provide a clear view of a camp, one occupant, on a ledge next to a speeder. A heater unit sat before the man — and could see the shadow of a beard from her vantage point — and a tent just beyond him.

Her descent through the clouds had paid off, placing her behind and above the individual in front of the flickering heater, and she carefully picked her way down, sliding into the shadows behind her. Cloaked in an impression of emptiness, she approached the individual and ignited her lightsaber at his neck line. "Move and you die."

"We all die sometime, my dear Ventress."

The familiar voice nearly put her back on her heels as she rounded the chair to look into the familiar face of one elusive, and impossibly present, Obi-Wan Kenobi.

"I am rather surprised to see you working with him. I must say I am a little dismayed after all our encounters; I truly believed you favored *me*."

She laughed softly, falling back into the sheer pleasure of bantering with a worthy opponent. It was *one* of the reasons she'd enjoyed facing Obi-Wan so much as opposed to Anakin before his ascension to his position as the Emperor's right hand. "Given the choice, I might have." Asajj retorted a little more harshly than she intended. She pushed on. "The information we received stated a Rebel cell was meeting, Kenobi; clearly a trap for *him*."

"And so he sent you."

"He wouldn't have if he had known you would be here. He searches for you."

"I know."

"Then why appear here, why now?"

"He searches the galaxy for something he will never find."

"And as an old friend you simply came to urge him in the right direction?"

"Encourage him to give up, actually," Obi-Wan chuckled. "He will never find what he seeks."

"You cannot know that."

"Perhaps I misspoke? It's been so long since I had the pleasure of adult company, I think my skills may be rusty."

"You have them." Asajj was suddenly struck with the certainty. "*You* have Luke and Leia. Vader *will* kill you."

"He will try." Obi-Wan acknowledged. "Just as you seem poised to do, my dear."

"We all have objectives, my *dear* Obi-Wan; while your death is one of mine, it will not be here or now." She extinguished her lightsaber and stepped back, keeping it in hand and at the ready, but not ignited. "I dare say if I kill you before I rid him of his heart, it will not have the same impact."

"She lives?" Obi-Wan paused for barely a moment, following her cryptic comment as she'd known he would. "You have Padmé?"

"Not I."

Obi-Wan stroked his beard thoughtfully, watching her from his still relaxed position by the heater unit. "Is she well?"

"Well enough. Caged as she is, there is little she can do. Before you seek to *rescue* her, Obi-Wan, know that she is beyond your reach at the very center of the krayt dragon's nest."

"She is a strong woman; if anyone can curb him, it is Padmé." He waved to a stump nearby. "Sit, my dear. We have much to discuss."

Asajj reluctantly sat, but it was an opportunity she hadn't expected to get. "She seeks her children and *you* Obi-wan; she has since she woke from the coma. She knows you were there before they were taken."

“You’ve spent much time with her, have you?”

“Several months before her capture, we worked together as part of a Rebel cell.”

“And now you both work with *him*. Interesting.”

“Your capture would end my servitude.”

“So certain of that, are you?”

“Your death, then,” she flashed him a smile. “Your capture would allow him to take the credit for your death.”

“I am so pleased the subject of my demise has brought a smile to your face, my dear. It is unlike you to be so dour.”

“I can’t let you leave.”

“You cannot afford to let me stay,” Obi-Wan countered with a half smile. “If I do not leave, the location of Padmé’s children will forever remain unknown.”

“And if I let you leave, you will have some clever way to escape detection or being followed, no doubt.”

“I see the years haven’t dulled your wits, my dear.”

“Nor yours.” Asajj considered him for a moment, looking for any clues as to where he’d been the last two years. His clothing was the same as it had always been -a tan tunic and breeches. He’d lost the Jedi robes, but still favored the cream colors. His suit, however, looked worn. His boots had seen better days, dried sand and dirt around the base of his chair. No lightsaber was visible, but Asajj wasn’t stupid; he’d come to lure Vader and Vader had already tried to kill him once. He was armed; she simply couldn’t see where. Her gaze traveled upwards to his chin—

“As much as I appreciate being admired by such a capable woman, perhaps we should continue our conversation?”

Eyes snapping back to his, she found one of his eyebrows arched in a sardonic tilt. “A lady takes her pleasure where she can, my *dear*.” Pushing to her feet, she stared at him. “You won’t allow yourself to be captured?”

“Not this night, no.”

“I can’t let you leave.” Repeating herself, Asajj wasn’t sure who she was trying to convince, him or her.

“And yet, it is the *only* thing you can do, my dear.” Obi-Wan stayed where he was, bending forward to warm his hands at the heater unit. ‘All this damp,’ he explained when she stared at him in surprise. “It takes some getting used to.”

“Leaving empty handed is not my only option, my *dear* Obi-Wan.”

He sighed. “I did not say empty handed, did I?”

Asajj was forced to react swiftly as a satchel was thrown at her. She looked from it to Obi-Wan and back. “And this is?”

“Several identification cards for as of yet unreported Rebel sympathizers.”

“You would sacrifice—”

“They’re dead.”

Which was more in line with what she knew of Obi-Wan; that he appeared to remain unchanged was oddly comforting. “He may choose to seek retribution on their families.”

“Which is why I chose only those with no known relatives, or those who lost every relative in the wars. They should suffice to give your report of a Rebel camp eliminated, yes?”

“You couldn’t have known he would not come.”

“He didn’t know I would be here,” Obi-Wan reasoned, smiling faintly. “He has always been able to sense a trap. If he came, we would now be fighting. I suspected he would not; a known Rebel cell on Naboo is to be expected with her history.”

Asajj turned to go.

“And Ventress?”

“Yes, Obi-Wan?”

“If you can avoid telling him about our interlude, I would consider it a *personal* favor.”

“I owe you nothing,” she told him curtly. “Next time we meet, Obi-Wan, one of us will die.”

“Then we had best not meet; it would pain me to have to kill you. May the Force be with you, my dear.”

“Hide well, my *dear* Obi-Wan.” she returned as she stepped back into the shadows.

Naboo — Month Twenty Seven, Day Eleven PEF

Late Morning

Morning was almost gone by the time Asajj made her way back to the square where the shuttle was still parked, satchel of the Rebel ID cards slung over her shoulder. Her fingers were almost completely numb and the arm ached around the cut. The crowds had all but vanished, leaving the shuttle alone with its guards. She made her presence known to the scout trooper guards and slipped onboard, heading straight for the medkit’s storage.

She found the medic of the group going through the kit, sorting it and taking inventory.

“Must you do that now?” She all but snapped as she stopped in the doorway. “The contents haven’t changed since we landed.”

“Imperial requirements, Lady Ventress,” the trooper replied easily, continuing to sort without looking up. “They require an inventory a set number of days unless engaged in battle.”

“And even then sometimes, I’m sure,” she tossed back caustically and then, almost conversationally. “I require it’s use to bind an injury.”

The medic’s head snapped up and his eyes widened as he took in the bandage around her bicep and the blood streaking her arm. His expression immediately turned clinical. “Upper arm injuries are difficult to treat one handed, my Lady; may I?”

Exhausted, she settled into one of the jump seats and offered him her arm; it was the fastest way for her to be able to get some shut eye and she wasn’t about to refuse the help. “Do it.”

The medic was as quiet as he was efficient and within a few minutes her arms were cleaned, closed and covered in a bacta patch. A shot for the pain and antibiotics for infection and she was pronounced all patched up.

“Thank you, trooper.” Standing, Asajj turned towards the cockpit, needing to catch a few hours of sleep but unwilling to do so until she spoke with Vader. If he was free and she didn’t report, she knew the worst of the damage he could inflict. “Where is Lord Vader?”

“With the Queen, my Lady. Their meeting is to begin at mid-day; any minute now.”

And she wasn’t expected to attend. Excellent. “I’ll be in the cockpit. I’m not to be disturbed until his return, is that clear?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.” Sealing herself in the blessedly empty and quiet cockpit, Asajj settled into the co-pilot’s chair and closed her eyes. Later, she would give her report to Vader; later, she would decide if she should tell him about Kenobi or not. For now, she needed to sleep and sleep was quick in coming.

Naboo — Month Twenty Seven, Day Eleven PEF

Mid Afternoon

“Ventress.”

Her eyes snapped open at the sound of Vader’s voice and Asajj was on her feet before she was fully awake. “Master?”

“Report.”

“Re—” she struggled to come out of the sleep within which she’d been captured, dreaming of her discussions with Obi-Wan over the years. For all he’d been her enemy, he’d always, *always* afforded her a measure of respect few others had. It had taken their meeting earlier to dredge up her memories. Struggling to pull herself from them, she focused on the stern looking man in the doorway and kicked the satchel that Obi-Wan had give her to him, spilling the contents across the floor. The bloodied contents, she realized suddenly. Several of the identifying markers were crusted with blood and body parts. Not for the first time did she wonder where they’d come from.

She kept her face impassive, inwardly cursing herself for the rookie mistake; she should have inspected the contents before Vader's return.

Kneeling, she collected the badges back into the sack, committing some of the stranger alien races to memory. Fortunately, she'd encountered all of them in Rebel cells before and if Vader searched her memory, she'd be able to bring up the battles. Vader, however, didn't seem inclined this morning as he picked a few of the chits from the satchel and examined them, his eyebrows rising as he carded through the identifiers.

"Did they give you any trouble?"

"No, Master."

"Good," he tucked the identifications back into the satchel and passed it to Artoo behind him. "Find somewhere to put that, Artoo."

The droid toddled and trundled away.

Vader stepped into the cockpit and closed the door, making Asajj take a step backwards; she didn't like be trapped with him in small spaces.

He didn't seem to notice as his gaze was on the main viewport and the Theed Palace directly before them. "The Queen has chosen not to follow my advice in surrendering the names of the traitor governments who have refused to trade with Naboo. I've identified one of her handmaidens that can be *molded* to the Empire's way of thinking. Regrettably, the Queen will need to be eliminated. Not today; we will depart as planned and you will return in secret." his gaze finally found hers. "Three nights from now the handmaiden in question will be visiting family; the rest of the Royal household and all of the advisors will, regrettably, meet an unexpected end at evening session. Ms. Kylantha will have the Empire's full support in her candidacy for becoming the next Queen."

"Yes, Master."

"We leave this evening after dinner. We're dining with the Queen and her ministers as a show of good faith."

"Yes, Master."

Vader turned and exited the cockpit, leaving her alone.

Asajj considered what she'd just been told and smiled faintly. Three days hence she would be no where near Naboo and several of her known Rebel sympathizers will have vanished in the accident that killed the Queen and her advisors. Checking the chrono, she calculated how much time she would need and nodded. It was possible. With the invitation into the Palace, it would put the focus on Vader and his escort. To put her plan in motion, she would shadow them into the Palace without being seen, giving her the access necessary to set her plan in motion.

If everything went to plan, three days hence Naboo would be in mourning and the Empire would have an open door to placing their puppet ruler on the throne.

Month Twenty Seven, Day 14 PEF

Author's Note: This was supposed to go up Sunday. All I have to say is Migraines suck. Enjoy.

Chapter 89

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Seven, Day Fourteen PEF

Early morning

Padmé stared out the viewport as the starlines passed in blurs of brilliant light.

They'd left Naboo roughly two days before, jumping to hyperspace almost immediately and headed for a location unknown to her. That they were still in hyperspace led her to believe they were headed to Coruscant, which was unlikely considering Anakin wanted to keep her as far away from the Emperor as possible. No, more likely they were headed to another of the core worlds, or possibly beyond them into the known mid rim planets. It was only a guess on her part, for she hadn't seen Anakin since his departure from their suite the day they'd arrived in orbit.

Their argument right before his departure had been heated and brief, and Padmé had been left in tears, overwhelmed by the reminder of who he had been and everything they'd lost, the memories threatening to break her for the first time in months. Flashbacks had been near instant and brutally persistent, taking her back to times where they had been happy, in sync and in love. Images of their more passionate times, stolen moments between missions and senate meetings.

Threepio had tried to help her, but hadn't been able to reach her.

It had taken her almost the whole of the time he'd been on planet to sort through the images and walk herself through the darkness to put herself back together. The shredded hopes she held in a fragile hold at war with the knowledge of what had been and what *might* still be. If only Anakin wanted it as badly as she did.

Artoo had returned, greeted her amicably and spent time with both her and Threepio, but after two days of the droid coming in and out of the suite, of anticipating Anakin's return so she could *finally* get some answers, she'd come to an inevitable and disappointing conclusion.

Anakin was avoiding her.

Again.

For a man who like to face most of foes head on, she found his lack of presence frustrating and infuriating.

The worst part by far was the broken promise on top of the other broken promises he'd given her. His promise to treat her as an equal, to give her freedom had been nothing but

pretty words to keep her placated. While he'd been on Naboo, she'd tried to leave their suite only to find herself locked in and the comm. system giving her access to a single office who was always polite but otherwise useless. Vader's promises to allow her to assist with finding Luke and Leia was another casualty; with his continued denials of her to his office, she'd lost hope of him honoring their deal. His continued absences and infrequent contact only reinforced that she was not his equal partner.

Despite all of this, she was determined to get her answers... once she could get him in front of her.

Threepio and Artoo were charging, the flickering lights of their charging ports illuminating the darkness about them behind her, and she turned to look at the droids instead of the starlines for a change in scenery.

Artoo had been less than forthcoming with his master's whereabouts, saying only that he was preparing for a planetary landing and had been spending his time in the hangar bay and the detention centre. After the first day and a half, Padmé had asked Artoo to deliver a message; a message that had gone unanswered for all the droid had assured her he'd delivered it.

Isolated as she was, Padmé chose to bide her time; Anakin would return eventually — everything of his was inside the suite.

The hours passed slowly as Padmé maintained her vigil. Yet Anakin didn't return.

Artoo completed his recharging cycle and, as Artoo was slipping out of his charging station, he toodled at her in concern, Threepio still having some time left on his cycle.

"I'm alright, Artoo," she assured him tiredly. Her anger burned in her gut, sustaining her, but it had shifted into disappointment. Anakin hadn't been one to go back on his promises to her before their... *before*. If this change was a consequence of that time between, it wasn't one she particularly liked and he would hear her. "Do you know where Anakin is?"

He gave a mournful negative followed by an apologetic sound.

"It's not your fault, Artoo," Padmé assured him.

The chime at the door sounded and she glanced at it in surprise. Striding over to the controls, she pressed the comm. panel. "Yes?"

"The door controls have been released, Lady Vader." one of the troopers stationed at her door told her.

"Thank you, trooper," Padmé clicked off the comm. with a frown and glanced at Artoo, who had followed her to the door. "Unlocked? Well, good, right? Come on, Artoo, let's go for a walk while Threepio finished his charging cycle. I'm sick of this room."

Padmé hit the door controls and was gratified to see the door slide open. The troopers at her door stood at attention as she stepped through and she waved them away when they made to follow. "Follow me," she told them pleasantly, "and I'll make sure you spend the next forty eight hours in a bacta tank."

"Our orders—"

“Are you guard this room,” she told them firmly. “Disobey me at your peril, trooper, for I am an excellent shot and I know *every* weak point on that armor.”

The troopers exchanged looks, clearly communicating beneath their helmets and Padmé turned to go.

“My lady—”

“Don’t test me, trooper,” glancing back over her shoulder, she kept her words pleasant.

“But, my lady—”

“If you finish that sentence with anything but have a nice walk, it will be the last thing you speak for some time. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, my lady.” there was a pause and then an inclination of their heads. “Have a nice walk.”

“Thank you, troopers.”

Leaving them behind her, Padmé headed for the training salle. She needed to work off some of the excess energy being cooped up for days had given her. When she arrived however, she found it occupied.

And not by the individual she was looking for.

The familiar figure was going through a series of katas that Padmé didn’t recognize, her twin blades in hand but un-ignited. The dark circles about her eyes stood out in her pale face as she breathed evenly, deliberate in her motions. Pausing in the doorway, Padmé glanced down at Artoo, who remained silent, only to have the ice-blue eyes of the Force Adept looking back at her when she lifted her head back to the other woman.

“Padmé.”

“Asajj.”

“I see you’ve slipped the leash.”

“And you look no worse for wear.” Determined to be civil, Padmé kept her hands loosely at her sides and her tone even. “How was Naboo?”

“Interesting,” Asajj smiled but Padmé could see there was no job behind it; it was a calculated move, as much as the appraising look that was now aimed her way. Even as she did, she stepped into the next deliberate stance. “And informative.”

“Which you would only tell me if you wanted me to ask, Asajj.” Despite the distance and animosity now between them, this part of the Force Adept hadn’t changed. “What did you learn?”

“Shouldn’t you be asking your *dear* husband?”

“How you do know I haven’t already?”

Asajj laughed softly. “You’re far too calm, Padmé.”

Padmé frowned at the cryptic comment. Had something happened on Naboo that she was unaware of? “Is there something I should know specifically?”

“Nothing the holonews won’t be able to tell you.” turning, Asajj presented her profile to Padmé and continued breathing evenly, slipping into a crouched balance position. “If you’re allowed to watch the holonews.”

Biting back a sharp retort, Padmé breathed deeply before answering. “That still doesn’t answer my question about what *you* learned, Asajj.”

“A conversation for another time.” Ventress effectively cut off the line of conversation and changed its direction. “Did you meet your guest while we were away?”

“My guest?”

“That would be a no,” straightening from her crouch with a smooth move, Asajj stepped back. “Perhaps you should ask your... husband.”

“I would if I could find him,” Padmé returned evenly. “You’ll be pleased to know he refused to answer my questions about Lianna and the rest.”

“You expected otherwise?” Asajj chuckled, shaking her head. “Every day he closes the net around you further and you... you lie there, accepting your fate. Where is the woman who was so determined to rid the galaxy of Vader? Where’s the woman who saw nothing but the misdeeds and atrocities of the Sith Lord? Or have you forgotten the fate of the Wookiees? The Twi’leks sold into slavery? Have you been brought so under his spell that you don’t remember the younglings in the Jedi temple?”

“Stop it!”

“The truth cannot be stopped. No matter how good his mask, or how much you deny what he is, that truth will surface sooner or later, Padmé.” With a noise of contempt, Asajj stepped towards the door. “I look forward to watching you betray everything you believe in, Lady Vader, as you search the reaches of the galaxy for the one thing you will *never* find at his side.”

Padmé held her tongue as Asajj disappeared into the hallway, though she desperately wanted to say something to refute the accusation. Even to bring Luke and Leia home, she would never sacrifice the very values that had driven her life. She’d sacrificed everything to ensure those ideals prospered only to have the very foundation of her belief shaken when the Senate had voted for the formation of the Galactic Empire only to wake up to find herself in labour and abandoned.

Artoo pressed into her leg and whistled a concerned inquiry.

“I’ll be okay Artoo. I shouldn’t let her get to me, especially not when I *know* she’s trying to drive a wedge between Anakin and I.” With a sigh, she shook her head and rubbed her hands over her face. “I just wish he’d talk to me. The more he avoids and won’t talk with me, the more I can’t help thinking that she might be telling me the truth. Am I blind, Artoo?”

He toodled a reply and beeped a rude noise, making her smile.

“Thanks.” she patted his dome. “Now, who is this visitor that they keep talking about?”

Outside the training room, Asajj paused to listen to the exchange between Padmé and the droid.

As Padmé voiced the very question Asajj had hoped to illicit, her lips twitched. Padmé was not going to like what she found when the droid led her to their *guest*. Even less when Vader caught her with him.

A shame Asajj couldn't be a bug on the wall to observe. She had her own preparations to make, however, and quickly slipped away before the droid led Padmé exactly where Asajj wanted her.

"Why are we on the detention level, Artoo?" A shiver ran down Padmé's spine as Artoo directed the lift to open on the high security level. She'd never have made it on her own, not that she was sure why they were there to begin with, but her privileges didn't include this deck. "I asked you to take me to the guest they keep talking about. Guests aren't generally kept on the detention level.

Artoo gave a mournfully soft sound she didn't recognize, but he was too far ahead of her for her to read the translation.

They passed through a control area without a guard, the corridors dark and quiet; an empty cell block. Passing through the halls, Padmé was reminded of the times where she'd been forced to escape from situations similar to this. She wouldn't have wished her worst enemy into one of these cells. Rounding a corner, they came to a high security cell that was generally used for dangerous persons or those of unexpectedly proficient and unexpected skills. Jedi counted on that number and Padmé's heart sank to her toes as she saw that the cell was not only active but occupied.

A figure lay slumped beside the small, floor anchored cot that was the only piece of furniture in the room. Their hair was dark and matted, visible even through the gloom of the cell. Their breathing was shallow and harsh, as if it hurt. And it may have. Even from her vantage point outside the ray shielded room, she could see tears in their shirt showed open sores and bloodied furrows on the skin beneath fabric that was dark with bodily fluids. She could only imagine the smell as the inmate shifted, a flash of light skin just below their shorts catching her eye. An involuntary gasp escaping her as she realized that the blackness of what she thought had been pants was, in reality, bruises and blood that covered their legs from mid-thigh down.

Her gasp caught the attention of the inmate and the man groaned, shifting, as if making to get up.

"Oh please, don't move," she couldn't help herself, stepping right up to the ray shield that prevented their escape, stopping just shy of putting her hands on it. "Please don't hurt your ___"

The figure's head came around sharply and it was his eyes that prompted recognition.

“Max-!” Padmé’s breath caught in her throat as she took in the beaten and bruised form before her, her eyes burning.

Max.

Max was *here*.

Max was...

Her gaze traveled over his injuries. One of his eyes was swollen almost shut, his nose broken and his jaw bruised. Visibly tortured despite the fact that someone appeared to have tried to clean him up, her gaze lingered on the polished white of his finger bones, which stuck out through the backs of his hands, surrounded in bloodied rings like gaudy decorations. Crippled, only his thumbs seem to have been spared.

Guilt swept through her with such an intensity it almost buckled her knees.

This was *her* doing.

Max had only become a target because of *her*.

“Padmé,” his voice was reedy and raw; nothing like the teasing man who’d helped her build their successful Rebel cell.

“Max...” choking on her guilt, Padmé pressed her hands to the ray shield, knowing it was a futile attempt to reach him as the energy rippled and crackled under her touch. “What are you doing here?”

His laugh rattled in his lungs and made him cough. “I’m a prisoner, princess; what’s it look like?”

“Not like... What did... your hands—”

“They alternated,” he looked at them dispassionately, as if they belonged to someone else. “After the first couple, it was like it wasn’t happening to me. I heard myself scream, saw the bones push through the skin...” he shrugged, wheezing, “Whatever cell they’re keeping you in, it looks like your’re being taken better care of.”

“It’s better appointed,” she agreed, her heart in her throat. “Oh Max, I’m sorry; you shouldn’t be here. This is my fault, *all* my fault. I’m sorry.”

“At least you’re not trying to run me over in the hallways,” he coughed, blood flecking his lips. “Though, in retrospect, I’d welcome that now.”

“Maybe I can get you out of here, maybe—”

“Cruel to the last, Padmé,” he laughed weakly. “Hope? Here? No. Once I’m delivered to the Emperor, I’m a dead man. I’ve accepted it.”

Padmé blinked. “To... the Emperor? Max, why would you be taken to the Emperor?”

“I always knew your husband was a man of power, sweetheart; I just never knew he was *the* man of power.” His bark of laughter was self-deprecating and wry. “Some slicer I turned out to be.”

“You think that the Emperor is my husband? *Emperor Palpatine?*”

"I don't blame you, Padmé; political matches can be difficult. I wouldn't want him anywhere near kids of mine either."

"Max, Palpatine's not... I'm not married to the Emperor, Max."

He wheezed a chuckled. "You still can't tell me the truth, even now?"

"I..." Padmé swallowed hard. "I'm *not* married to Palpatine, Max. That is the truth."

A low, charming laugh somewhere behind her alerted her to the fact that she and Max were no longer alone. Max flinched as Anakin stepped around the corner and into view. "Married to the Emperor? For such an intelligent man, you really are an idiot."

"Ana—"

Max flinched, shrinking back against the bunk. "Lord Vader."

He bowed with a flourish, his smile hard, and Padmé unconsciously stepped between him and Max protectively. Vader's eyes flashed as he noted her movement, but his attention remained on the prisoner. "At your service Komar Edge. Or should I call you Mefral Fabun. No? Perhaps Edoc Legule?"

Padmé watched him warily, uncertain of where this was going, but she could feel the tension in the room, so thick with confusion behind her, and malice before her, that it threatened to choke her. Anakin had taken the news of her and Max about as well as she'd expected him to. At the time she'd been grateful for his hurt; it had allowed her to keep distance between them. Now... now she regretted it. Max had been a solace once and she couldn't let him pay for her selfishness; he was still her friend.

"Anakin, please, let's go somewhere else and—"

"There's no need for that, Padmé." he finally focused on her, his smile charming, "Why don't you introduce me to the other man in your life? It seems he's a man of many names along with many talents."

"Anakin, he's injured; he needs medical attention."

"He'll be taken care of shortly," Anakin assured her pleasantly, so much so that it only reinforced the unease she was feeling. "Now; introduce us, Padmé."

"I don't—"

The blue gaze leveled on her was uncompromising and Padmé swallowed hard. "Anakin Skywalker, meet Max, my former financial analyst. Max, Anakin Skywalker; formerly the Hero with no fear."

Max flinched but didn't respond.

"Always so shy. There's no reason for that now, is there, Padmé?" Anakin's chuckle was dark as his tone was friendly. "We're all friends here. Why don't you try again, only properly this time."

Padmé met Anakin's gaze and realized what he was doing. "Anakin, please."

"Now, Padmé."

There no compromise in his tone and Padmé flinched even as she acknowledged that this was her responsibility. “If I do, you have to promise me he’ll be taken care of; tended to. *Properly.*”

“Of course.”

“*Promise me.*”

“I promise.”

Swallowing hard, Padmé turned back to Max. “Max, meet Anakin Skywalker; my... husband.”

Max’s eyes widened almost comically, a gasp and then a cough catching him as he doubled over, blood spattering the ground as he wheezed and struggled, his gaze never leaving hers. Betrayal was in those eyes; complete and utter. He couldn’t speak, but he didn’t need to as she read every condemnation, every regret, every accusation in their depths. Padmé stepped back, only to have Anakin slip his arm around her shoulders. His touch was strong and firm, but there was no comfort in it. She struggled, looking to break free, and Anakin only tightened his hold, his unspoken message clear.

“*Him?*” Max’s choked accusation was layered with agonized betrayal. “You said he killed your husband!”

“From a certain point of view,” Anakin agreed amicably before she could respond. “I ceased using the name Anakin Skywalker to be the day I became Darth Vader. In essence, I *did* kill him.”

Padmé flinched. “Anakin, please, he needs medical attention.”

“In a moment, Padmé. You see, Max led Asajj on a merry chase. You never told me he was so talented.”

“How else would I have avoided detection for so long?” barely holding onto her temper, Padmé was determined to do nothing that would put his rage on the wounded, tortured man behind the ray shields. She hadn’t been able to protect Max and, with how calm Anakin was being, *especially* with how *hurt* he’d been when he’d found out how she and Max had been lovers, the hair on the back of her neck was standing on end. She didn’t trust this charm; Anakin had *never*, even as a child, liked sharing her with others. “I had to have help, especially the technical help he could give me. I’m not stupid; I know my limits.”

“Clearly not.”

“I told you I had allies.”

“And a lover,” Anakin agreed smoothly, a dangerous glint flashing in his eyes despite the conversational tone. “He’s not what I expected.”

“Anakin, please; he didn’t *know*. Don’t hurt him anymore.”

“Begging, Padmé? For *him*?”

“If that’s what it takes to get the medical attention he needs, yes! He was there for me, Anakin, when you weren’t. When you’d turned your back on everything we had, Max was

there. He helped me, can't you see that? It's because of *him* I was able to avoid capture; he protected me when you couldn't."

"Is that what you're calling it now?"

Glancing at Max, Padmé returned her gaze to Anakin quickly. "What else am I going to call it? Max was there for me while you were trying to burn the galaxy to the ground!"

"I thought you were dead, Padmé," his voice dropped to a hiss. "I was *grieving*."

"So what, the galaxy was just a bigger Tusken Raider Village?"

"They deserved it; for killing my mother." His eyes flashed a yellowish green before settling back into blue. "The galaxy kept me from you and then took you from me. They had to pay!"

"And now? I've been with you for months, Anakin; when does it stop?"

"It doesn't."

There was such a finality to his words that Padmé took a step back, the ray shield behind her crackling as she brushed it. "It has to end somewhere. People deserve their freedom; it's what we were fighting for all those years!"

"Freedom to do what, Padmé? To fight and kill one another in poverty? To rebuilt without support or direction? To take advantage of those less fortunate? Or is this about you?" Anakin stood his ground, crossing his arms over his chest, flicking his fingers at the man behind her. "What freedom did you want? The freedom to deny me? To *adulter* when it suits you?"

"That's not fair, Anakin!"

"No? How about you, Max?" His gaze passed her by. "Do you think that's a fair assessment? After all, she did take advantage of your trust."

"I'm not getting between you two again, man. I would *never* have—"

"I asked you a question," Vader lifted one hand and Max let out a yelp as his feet came off the floor. "And you owe me an answer, *Max*."

"Anakin, please—"

"*Now*."

"We always knew you were alive, sir," Max told him, his breathing shallow and laboured. "We hid her at her insistence, she said no one could know beyond those who already knew—"

"Not even her *beloved* husband."

"She insisted you were dead!"

"And that she remain that way."

"Yes!"

"Could you have brought her back from the dead?"

Nodding as he gasped for air, Max lifted his broken hands to his throat as if he couldn't breathe. "Y-ye-!"

Padmé lunged for Anakin as the slicer started turning blue, grabbing his outstretched forearm. "Let him go, Anakin; you promised me!"

Anakin looked straight at her and smiled boyishly. "As you wish."

There was a sickening sound of bone snapping and then a body hitting the ground behind her.

Silence reigned for what felt like an eternity as Padmé froze. Watching Anakin watching her, an easy smile on his lips as he brought his hand down to stroke her hair. Unable to step away, she saw him gently caress her hair, his smile taking on a smugly triumphant tilt. Feeling as if she wasn't in her body, as if everything in her world had just shifted, she watched as if from another place outside of her body, the sounds around her muffled.

When he spoke, he broke the spell.

"*No one* touches what is mine and lives."

Padmé stepped away from him, turning disbelieving eyes to the body on the ground behind the ray shield. She swallowed hard, feeling the emptiness inside her grow, the tight band around her chest reminiscent of when she'd seen him on Mustafar before Luke and Leia had been born; before they'd been separated. She'd seen Anakin kill before, seen him protect her, but this... Max had been helpless, his only crime Max's body lay un-moving, a pool of fluid spreading out from the heap and she turned away to find Anakin watching her, his lips moving.

She hadn't heard him.

"What?"

"I said, I'm going to fix this but I need *time*, Padmé."

"Fix *what*?"

Max was *dead*; what was he talking about?

"*This*; us, your death."

She blinked at him, speechless. He'd changed gears so fast, her head was spinning.

He continued. "I want you standing beside me; I *want* to let you live freely."

"I don't—"

"I know, I know," he smiled eagerly at her, as if the body of the man he'd just executed wasn't cooling barely feet away, "I'm getting ahead of myself. Bringing you back needs to be done the right way; if we don't handle it carefully, your resurrection would be used as a rallying cry for the insurgents. You wouldn't be able to hold your seat as a senator, but as my wife you'd have the ear of the Emperor. I know why you didn't want to come back sooner, but once things are sorted with the Emperor, and you'd make a speech—"

Staring at him as he began to warm to his subject, she couldn't believe what she was hearing, what she'd just *seen*. As he spoke about her turning her back on every ideal that she'd ever stood for; easily, as if he didn't know her at all. Her Anakin would never, *never*, have asked her to betray her ideals and her principles simply to ensure her own survival. He'd accompanied her on too many missions and seen too many close calls to *ever* believe it was possible.

Death hadn't scared her if it meant that her death would uphold the precepts of truth and justice she'd held so dear.

Her heart crashed to her feet at how badly she had misjudged him; how badly he'd fooled her. She'd come to him through betrayal and, at some point, she'd lost sight of what he'd become and he'd done, turned to him of her own volition, willfully blind in her acceptance of his support. From the start, all she'd wanted was Luke and Leia and a small corner of the galaxy to call their own, where they could grow in peace as a family. The months leading up to their return from Dandoran had given her hope that Anakin had wanted the same; that he would leave the power behind and they would be a family. They'd stopped fighting and he'd *pretended* to be the man she'd once loved.

Only, Anakin had ceased to be.

In his place, corrupted and twisted by power and intention was Darth Vader. Vader, who had turned on the very order that had opened its doors and taken him in, providing shelter and training to a frightened boy they had doubts about training. Vader, who had gone searching for his mother and slaughtered a whole village of Tusken Raiders to the last child. Vader, who had fought his mentor, betrayed the very man who called him *brother*, and tried to kill him. Vader who had slaughtered Jedi younglings as easily as he'd just broken the neck of a man who had done nothing but offer her comfort after *Vader's* betrayal and abandonment.

Numbness invaded her limbs as she watched him animatedly going on about what needed to be done to bring her out of the shadows. The Anakin she remembered, the sweet young man with big dreams who had been her husband, was gone.

Oh Vader could pretend, *had* pretended, playing on her most precious memories. She'd come to him through betrayal and, at some point, she'd lost sight of what he'd become and he'd done, turned to him of her own volition, willfully blind in her acceptance of his support.

That charade was done.

He'd shown his true colors. Vader was a man who would do anything to achieve his goals so long as the things *he* deemed important were kept safe. He was a man who was so twisted by power he could no longer see that the ends didn't justify the means. He took what he wanted, uncaring of the cost to others so long as he, or his Master, benefited. He was willing to betray *everything* to achieve it

She could see that now.

He remained an echo in the animation of Vader's features, the color of Vader's eyes and the cadence of the Sith Lord's speech, but Vader *was not* Anakin. He had been, once, but no longer. If Anakin was still inside him, and he had to be *somewhere* for Vader to have fooled her so utterly, he was but a tiny fraction of the man before her and buried so deep that Padmé

had failed to reach him. Vader had absorbed him so completely, twisted his perception of her into an unimaginable perversion of his memories.

She'd been right all those months ago. Vader *had* killed her husband. He'd been lying to her for months and she'd willingly been blinded.

No more.

Never again would she be oblivious to the cruelty and cunning hidden beneath his handsome features and charming manners. Padmé knew she was stronger than that, stronger than when she'd first come to him and, despite his lies and elaborate deception, she was in a better place mentally, and more determined than ever to fight for her freedom. Once she had it, she'd resume her search for Luke and Leia.

Vader was in for a shock if he thought she was simply going to quietly accept his plans for her.

Vader's satisfaction at having broken the neck, and potentially several other bones in the body of the man who had once possessed what was *his* gave him a calm and a peace he hadn't known since Padmé had resumed eating and settled into her new life with him. It would be time for the next steps, as he'd explained, shortly, but first, he needed her to understand exactly what she'd need to do if there was any hope of having his Master call off the bounty on her head and welcome her openly. Vader was confident his Master *would* welcome his fellow Nabooian back into the fold as soon as she denounced the Rebels publicly and set her support firmly behind him.

"Once we've gotten back to Coruscant, I'll need to —"

"You killed him."

Vader stopped talking as she interrupted him and frowned. "You asked me to take care of him, Padmé."

"That's not what I meant and you *know* it!"

"Asking someone to take care of another individual is well known among the underworld, a place you've spent the last two years, as a signal to eliminate them," he reasoned with a half smile, trying to charm her to his way of thinking. "I only did as you asked."

"You *killed* him!" Her hands slapped against his chest and pushed, wiping the smile off his face. "He needed medical attention and time in a bacta tank."

"He was beyond saving, I did him a mercy."

"If that's what you have to tell yourself to sleep tonight, at least one of us will know you for the murderer you are."

She wasn't exactly wrong, but he hadn't expected her to react so forcefully to the Slicer's death. He'd been making a point; a point she seemed to have missed. "No one touches you but me, Padmé." his hands slid around hers and *pressed* them tightly to his chest as he leaned

towards her, his tone holding every ounce of possessiveness he felt towards her. "I'm your husband and you're my wife; that makes you *mine*."

"That's what you think, *Vader*."

"Vader." He frowned, eyes narrowing, unease creeping into his sense of well being. "You never call me Vader."

"I'll never call you anything else ever again," her eyes flashed as she made the promise, conviction in every syllable she spoke and every line of her posture.

"No." Vader shook his head, feeling the progress he'd made slipping away; when she called him Anakin, or any variant there of, Padmé was happier. And if it made her happy, if it gave her the link she needed to reminder her of who he'd been and was still, in a small way, he wanted her to use it. "No. I *want* you to call me, Anakin, you hear me?"

"You don't deserve to have that name," she snapped back, forcefully dragging her hands from under his and stepping back. "Like you said, you stopped being Anakin Skywalker the day you became Darth Vader."

That *wasn't* the information he'd wanted her to take away from his discussion with the slicer. "Enough. We're headed for Coruscant and I *intend* to see that you're restored to your rightful place at my side, Padmé."

"Over my dead body." Seething she stepped widely around him. "If you think I would ever turn my back on the ideals that we fought so hard for just because you want me to, you never knew me at all."

"We have to stop at the shipyard on Gwori first." Revealing that little fact wouldn't endanger anything he had set in motion and he'd learned over the last few months that she could be placated with bits of information to make her more receptive. "By the time we get to Coruscant, you'll see things my way."

"Keep dreaming," she told him fiercely. "Never again, Vader. *Never*, you hear me?"

His eyes narrowed. "Never is a long time."

"Not long enough."

Month Twenty Seven, Day 15 PEF

Chapter 90

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Seven, Day Fifteen PEF

Early morning

Padmé stood at the viewport, exhausted and emotionally drained from the confrontation with Vader in the cell block. Max was dead and it was *her* fault for having gotten involved with him in the first place. She'd spent the last several hours since returning to Vader's suite under armed escort, going over in her mind everything that had occurred since her capture by Vader and Asajj's betrayal.

Reluctantly, she'd come to the conclusion that Asajj had been right.

Her feelings were so far beyond anger, she had no name for them.

Only they weren't directed at Vader; they were directed at herself for allowing herself to be so thoroughly *duped*. She'd willfully allowed herself to be blinded by the familiarity, letting Vader manipulate her deep seated desire for the return of her family. A family which had once included the man he'd once been. Her desire for what had been, for what she knew *should* have been, coupled with her desperation to find Luke and Leia had left her vulnerable. And Vader had capitalized on every aspect of that vulnerability possible.

Reviewing his actions in her mind, those she'd been witness to over the past several months, had revealed man who was now so twisted by his ambition to be unrecognizable beyond the surface. Sure, he'd *been* Anakin once, so his mannerisms were those of her husband, but nothing in the way he processed his priorities *now* were close to what they had been before he'd taken the mantle of Vader.

Vader; Lord of the Sith.

Padmé shuddered as the thought drifted through her mind unbidden, but unlike before, she didn't shy away from it and didn't try to rationalize it. Since she'd turned to him the days after Luke and Leia's life day, needing the comfort and support, the *compassion* of someone who understood what she was going through, she'd blocked out what he'd become, focusing only on the aspects he'd let her see. Willfully, she'd let herself be blinded, ignored the signs of anything but what she *wanted* or needed to see. She'd rationalized his less than Anakin-like behavior as simply the stress he was under and not the truth.

Anakin had become Vader, consumed with his ambition and drive.

Alone in the suite, she stared at the vastness of space, unseeing but no longer blinded to his true nature and nothing between them could ever be the same again.

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Seven, Day Fifteen PEF

Late morning

Vader scanned the next file and then the next, sorting through the data of the latest information dump from the various contacts he had out looking for the twins. Since his confrontation with Padmé several hours ago, and the most satisfactory death of her former companion, he'd immersed himself in his search for the twins. Padmé had been most receptive to his advances when they were centered around their children and, if he was determined to not only reunite them all, but repair their relationship, this was the key.

Artoo was nearby, helping him sift through it. Needing some uncharacteristic reassurance, he directed a question to the droid. "How is she, Artoo?"

The droid turned his receptors and gave a sharp, scolding answer.

"Alright, no need to get short with me. I just wanted to know if she's taking care of herself."

Artoo's response was slightly longer and made him frown. "That was a little uncalled for. What's gotten into you?"

The bells and whistles that followed were beyond what Vader had been expecting.

Sitting back in his chair, shocked, Vader regarded the droid with wide eyes. "She's *my* wife, Artoo; that slicer had *no right*—"

Artoo cut him off with a shrill whistle and loud bleeting noise, followed by a holo being projected in the room, one of him and Padmé in front of the cell and there was no mistaking Padmé's expression.

"It's not that easy, buddy."

The insulting response from the droid clearly showed his disagreement.

"I am *not* making it more complicated! The moment I go back to the room she's going to ask me about those blasted planets again."

An uncompromising squwak answered him.

"I think relationship mechanics are beyond you, Artoo. I've *tried* telling her the truth. She either doesn't want to see it, or she's deliberately being obtuse to what needs to be done. Either way, she won't be able to see that eliminating the Jedi on those planets was necessary to ensure the safety and security of the Empire."

Artoo's rebuff was softer this time and less accusatory.

"I do know it," Vader propped his elbows on his desk, fisting his hands so he could rest his chin within the cradle. "She's still too idealistic about the Jedi, even after their betrayal."

The scolding was back as Artoo bleeted another accusation.

"I know, I know." With a sigh, Vader rubbed one hand over his face. "If you have another idea how to keep her from wandering the ship and putting herself in danger, I'm all ears. I

don't *like* locking her away, she just won't stay put if I don't. I just don't know what else to do, buddy. I thought all that time on Dandoran would solidify our relationship again."

The soft query, almost mournful in nature, was gentle and probing.

"Not the way I hoped," the admission was weary. "She still sees who I was and not who I *am*, buddy. Every time I try, we get into a fight. Every time."

Another inquiry.

Vader shook his head and smiled slightly, though it died almost immediately. "Not for a minute. I did what I had to and I'll continue to do what I need to. My only regret is that she's going to be hurt by it," came the immediate reply. "It was necessary to secure the prosperity and cooperation of such a politically valuable system."

Moving closer, Artoo gave a soft little whistle.

"What do you mean?"

A series of beeps and whistles had Vader shaking his head, but Artoo didn't let him interrupt, sipping off into a noisy tirade that escalated quickly back into harsh squeaks and beeps.

"That's *enough*, Artoo!" Vader pushed up from his desk, glaring at his friend, wondering idly if *everyone* important in his life was going to turn on him. "You *know* everything I've done as been for her, or to avenge her. The Republic was weak; the Jedi traitors. Padmé can't see that; she never could. Telling her the truth, regretting what had to be done... it solves nothing. I made my decisions. I stand by them. I'd do them again with all but one exception. If I had *known* Obi-Wan was going to steal her, I'd have taken her with me to Mustafar instead of leaving her on Coruscant!"

Artoo's question was harsh.

"So what? If she'd come with me, the twins would be with us, I could have told her more about the Jedi uprising and the purge in my own way instead of Obi-Wan poisoning her mind with a twisted version of the truth!"

There was no response from the astromech and Vader sighed, closing his eyes and bowing his head, letting his whole body sag onto his arms as they held his weight. "I'm not mad at you, Artoo. I'm just frustrated. If I could just find the twins, if I could present them to Padmé, bring them *home*, we could get past this and just be a family. She would have them to focus on, *us* to focus on... what am I *missing*?"

More silence greeted his question and Vader raised his head to find his astromech watching him in such a still silence, it was almost eerie. The only sign that Artoo was on were the smoothly blinking lights on his chassi.

Vader tried for levity. "Nothing to add, buddy?"

Artoo rotated his dome in a clearly negative response but again stayed silent.

The comm chirped on his desk and Vader flicked it on with a motion of his finger. "Vader."

“My apologies, Lord Vader, the Governor of Gwori has made contact and is requesting an audience.”

With a grimace that didn’t sound in his voice, Vader’s gaze flicked to the chrono on his desk before he responded. “Thank you, Captain. I’ll be on the bridge shortly. Tell the Governor I’ll make contact before the end of the hour.”

“Very good sir.”

The comm. clicked off.

Exhaling on a long breath, Vader stayed where he was for a long moment before standing upright and straightening his clothing. “Keep an eye on Padmé, Artoo. If she needs anything, let me know. Gwori is close enough to Coruscant we’ll have to be on our guard and that means she can’t leave the suite. If she does, she runs the risk of catching the attention of someone she shouldn’t; she’s supposed to be—”

A rude noise cut him off

“There you are.” Vader smirked. “I was starting to think that tirade earlier fried your vocabulator. Once we’re done on Gwori, I’ll have time to dedicate to the search for the twins. I need you to run comparison searched on the database; everything we’ve collected to date. I want you to cross reference the files from Threepio’s memory bank and see if you can pull any more data about who else was with Padmé when the twins were born. A reflection, a voice, anything. I know I’m missing something, I can *feel* it.”

Artoo barely acknowledge the order before Vader was out of his office and on his way to the bridge.

Whatever more there was to say, Vader was confident his droid wouldn’t spare him later; he never did. For now, he had a job to do and part of that job meant dealing with the lead politician on Gwori. Later, he would worry more about the puzzle that was his wife and his Astromech’s line of questioning.

Later.

For now, he pushed all thoughts of his wife and his children deep into the recesses of his mind and focused on his next task. There would be time enough later for everything else; Padmé wasn’t going anywhere.

Month Twenty Seven - Day 16 PEF, Morning

Chapter 91

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Seven, Day Sixteen PEF

Morning

In his office just off the bridge of the *Exactor*, Vader stood with his hands folded behind him as the ship hurtled through hyperspace.

His quarters were no longer the retreat they'd been over the last several weeks and Padmé had still been sleeping when he'd emerged from their room. She'd been curled up on the sofa and it had driven him to her side, only her determination the evening before had nearly stopped him. Her rejection had been clear, but he wasn't a man to give up when he wanted something; especially not when he'd done *everything* to reach this point for *her*.

Kneeling next to the sofa, he'd watched as her breathing, deep and even, sent a surge of gratification and pride through him. He'd done this. For all her complaints and accusations, if he pointed out the fact that he'd helped her heal, brought her back from the brink, there would be little she could say to refute it. A part of him was proud for having played a part in that, even as he yearned for her previous vulnerability in those moments. She'd been easy to manipulate and control; twisting and feeding the emotions she most needed, she'd been easy prey.

Watching her breathing and sleeping so deeply, if not peacefully, with barely-there shadows under her eyes, he'd been tempted to resort to a different kind of manipulation. Uncertain that Force manipulation would work on someone as strong willed as she was, even in slumber, Vader had finally shaken his head and pushed to his feet. In a moment of consideration, he'd taken the blanket that was at the foot of the sofa and draped it across her before heading for the door of their suite. He'd been in no mood for a fight and mercifully, she hadn't stirred.

Now, several hours and cups of caf later, he was waiting for their arrival on Gwori so he could get rid of the Force Adept and sent her on her hopeless quest. Once his inspection of the facility was done, he was looking towards refocusing his attention on his wife, whom he'd clearly neglected in their return from Dandoran. He could acknowledge that, despite the man things he'd needed to attend to upon their return, he shouldn't have let her spend so much time alone. Not making time for her had been a mistake.

Tapping the fingers of his artificial hand against those of his real one, Vader looked out the viewport without really seeing beyond it.

Padmé's attitude would be an issue. If she stood by her convictions, which he would do his best to persuade her otherwise, there would be problem with his Master's response. Vader was under no illusions that if he was unable to curb her revolutionist tendencies, his Master would

ensure she was beyond his reach permanently. Unsettled by the thought and determined that he would *never* allow that to happen, Vader turned from the viewport, fiddling with the fasteners on his artificial hand, the phantom pains of flesh that was no longer there to ache suddenly sharp and fierce. He swore, adjusting the fasteners around the glove with a vicious jerk and the sound of tearing cloth overrode the pains with a memory that elicited another kind of pain.

Catapulted back to Dandoran and an interlude with his wife; Vader was caught up in the memory almost as swiftly as the phantom pain had struck, a part of him wondering how long this time before he and Padmé reached that kind of accord again...

The sound of tearing cloth accompanied a slight tug at his neckline as Padmé attacked him, tearing his shirt to rags with one hand full in each fist. She broke the ravenous kiss, smiling up at him with a predatory grin, before slipping close, putting one foot behind his heel and knocking him backwards to the couch.

Vader went, trusting her as he fell, even as she fell with him. She caught his hands as he made to grab her, pushing them down beside his head as she straddled his lap. The intimate position had him shifting his hips, lifting to bring them into contact even as her lips claimed his, aggressively tilting his head back as she took control. Extricating his hand with a twist of his wrist, he tried to slide it into her hair, except she pulled back, catching it again and pinning it once more beside his head.

"I need to touch you, Padmé."

"Later, Anakin," she promised huskily, a tenor of command in her voice. "I'm in command this time; you're my prisoner now."

"Always a willing one, my love," he agreed on a groan, tilting his head to the side.

"Where's my fearless warrior?" her tease accompanied her bend to his neck and she scraped her teeth across his heart beat "The man who would never give in?"

"Defeated," he gasped as she ground herself against him. "I surrender!"

"Good," she sucked his pulse into her mouth, her fingers digging into his hands. "I would hate to have to punish you."

He went still beneath her as she pressed downwards, nearly swallowing his tongue as she bit him, hard, on one shoulder. "Perhaps I should misbehave," he offered making to break free if her grip. "If only to test your creativity."

Lifting her head, Padmé met his gaze as she slid backwards only to lean forward and slowly, ever so slowly, brushed her naked chest against his. A whisper soft caress that made him shudder, his eyes darkening to a deep, ocean blue even as hers were fathomless pools of the darkest chocolate.

"I don't need you to misbehave for that," she assured him with a purr. "But you're going to sit there and let me have my wicked way with you tonight... and you're going to love every minute of it."

His whole body jerked at her words, the images her bedroom voice conjuring playing havoc with his libido. "Every minute?"

“Every... *minute*...”

A knock on his office door jerked Vader from the memory, his hands closing into a fist as he channeled the emotion into it; he couldn't risk having it show on his face. He turned back to the viewport to hide his very visceral reaction to the memory and used the Force to activate the controls, the door sliding open. He said nothing, knowing he didn't need to.

“I'm sorry to disturb you, my Lord.”

“What is it, Captain?”

“The Emperor commands you make contact.”

“Take us out of hyperspace.” Taking a deep breath, the notice having just as much effect as an ice bath on his libido, he turned on his heel and strode out of his office. His long strides took him across the bridge towards the chamber where he'd contact his Master. As he walked, he sought to lock the memory of Padmé's advance deep within his subconscious, buried deep, beneath the simmering rage and frustration. The last thing he could do was confirm to his Master, before he had her cooperation, Padmé's continued existence. While the Emperor might suspect, Vader knew he could never, ever know until all the pieces were in place and Padmé agreed to his plans.

The chamber opened, revealing the massive floor to ceiling holo array. The Captain had followed him only so far as to deliver the instructions to take them out of hyperspace. Vader waited, the ship's pilots calculating how to do so safely, and controlled his breathing, bringing to mind all of the instructions he'd implemented over the last several days, making sure to clear his thoughts of all aspects of Padmé. Ventress' assignment he didn't dwell on, but let it flirting on the edges of his consciousness; it would well explain any agitation his Master might sense should he have to explain.

As the ship dropped out of hyperspace, the Captain turned and nodded to Vader. Turning, Vader took the two steps onto the platform and waved the door closed behind. Taking a knee, he reaffirmed his resolve; in this, he could not fail. He *would* not fail. He'd already paid the price once. Paying it a second time, this time for good, was unthinkable.

Padmé was considering the lock on Vader's office and examining the physical security features of it when the *Exactor* dropped out of hyperspace.

“Oh dear. I *do* hope nothing is wrong with the ship.”

“I'm sure it's nothing, Threepio,” Padmé's response was distracted. “Do you know where Artoo is?”

“I believe he said he would be on the hangar deck this morning.”

“Can you get him for me, please?”

“Certainly, Mistress. Is there anything I might be able to assist you with?”

“Can you open Vader's office? Do you have the code?”

“No Mistress.”

“Then no, Threepio; you can’t help me with this.” She flashed him a smile to soften the blow. “What’s for breakfast?”

“Bantha sirlon strips with tubers and fresh greens.”

“Sounds delicious. Is it ready yet?”

“Soon, Mistress. Should I contact Artoo before you sit down for the morning meal?”

“When I start eating is fine, Threepio,” shaking her head at his precise inquiries, she found he was the bright spot in her day, the way he had been in some of her darkest moments. “Let me know when it’s ready, will you?”

“Of course, Mistress.”

Padmé turned back to the pad and reviewed what she knew of the set up again in her mind and wishing for a manual that she could read. Unfortunately, manuals were in short supply and she remembered Vader telling her that the moment she opened the door forcefully, the bridge would be alerted. She’d been examining the controls again for the last half an hour, determined to get into the office and get the information Vader had once promised her. Information she doubted he’d be forthcoming with after their last discussion the night before.

Any hope of getting voluntary information from him about the twins and letting her help in the search had died on the detention deck when Vader had made it clear what he expected her to do in return for her continued existence. “How can he even *think* I would turn my back on everything the way he did?” she muttered darkly to herself, running her fingers along the edges of the security console.

Yes, even as she asked, she knew the answer.

He’d done it; for *her*. Or so he’d claimed.

Was it so much to ask that she do the same in return?

Vehemently *yes* to her way of thinking. If Anakin had come to her, instead of reaching out to Palpatine, if he’d *trusted* her, in them, their story would have had a very different ending. One, she firmly believed, would have been happier. He wouldn’t have immersed himself in the darkside and he wouldn’t have helped murder his former friends and mentors. No, if Anakin had trusted them, he would never have become Darth Vader; he would have instead been able to be a father to their children — children he could have helped raise discreetly.

Closing her eyes, Padmé banished those dreams from her mind. Vader had used her musings and desires against her before and she wasn’t about to let him do it again. This time... this time she would remain strong and not give into her baser urges. The mask was off and, while he still looked and sounded like Anakin sometimes, the image of his smile as he’d broken Max’s neck with such casual abandon was seared behind her eyelids. That angelic face hid a demon, one she’d denied existed for too long.

Grimly, Padmé turned from the security door and reached for the datapad to review her map to the flight deck, a plan already half formed in her mind. Somehow, she would get what she needed from Vader’s office and get off the ship. If she found nothing in his files so be it, but Padmé had an uneasy feeling that Vader had missed something, something he wasn’t

sharing with her, and she was determined to find out what. If the key to finding her children lay in his office, she would exhaust all her options to find it.

She would find Luke and Leia without him even if, for the first time, she acknowledged the painful reality that they might be safer growing up without her as a constant presence in their lives.

Vader, she knew, would never allow her to remain free and, if she wanted her children to be safe and happy, leaving them lost might be for the best.

Giving her head a shake, she fought off the grim thought and focused instead on the here and now. None of that would matter if she couldn't get into the office first. One step at a time; she'd deal with the impact of her in her children's lives if and when that became an issue. She had to find them first.

Ventress glanced at the trajectory on the monitor as the *Exactor* dropped out of hyperspace and frowned. That was unusual; few things could stop a warship the size of the *Exactor* and even fewer could rip one out of hyperspace. If that had been the case, the return to normal space would have been far less smooth. Which meant they had dropped out voluntarily.

In the middle of nowhere.

Interesting.

Checking the chrono, she found that they still had several hours before they arrived at Gwori where she was to select her new ship. More interesting. What was important enough to warrant an exit from hyperspace? Flicking the comm., she called the bridge.

"Deck Officer."

"Why have we stopped, lieutenant?"

"Lord Vader's orders, Lady Ventress."

"Thank you, lieutenant." flicking off the comm. she frowned. *Vader* had ordered the exit from hyperspace. The man was driven, determined to get her on her way and away from his wife to search for his children and former Master. What could *possibly* be important enough to—

Her gaze flashed to the holo display in sudden understanding.

Only *one* thing would be enough for the man to stop every plan he was hatching and respond. His Master had called. And the man had come to heel like a well trained anoobas.

Her lips twisting with disgust and a touch of self loathing, she shook her head; not that *she* was any better. Far be it for her to judge when a Master called their apprentice; she'd been answering to Masters for years, never finding one worthy. *Would never be* worthy. Asajj had accepted that she was skilled, but unsuited to the way of the Sith; that she'd been pulled back into Vader's web was yet another sin she could lay at Padmé's door.

If she wanted out of that web, she still had a part to play.

Glancing at the holo array she counselled herself to patience.

Her time for using it would come and then, when all was said and done, she would be *free*. Free from Vader and his abuses. Free from Padmé and her well-meaning lies. Free from the conflicts that embroiled both of their lives. She'd be free to go wherever she wished, to settle and start anew where no one knew her, where no one *expected* anything of her.

Free to be an architect of her own destiny.

It was only a matter of time.

Artoo whistled in distress as Padmé pointed at the door panel to Vader's office, running back and forth over several feet and spinning himself in circles as he toodled and blatted his response.

"How can you tell me no, Artoo? You've seen how he is, *what* he is." Padmé put her hands on her hips. "You *saw* what he did to Max, *how* he did it. He didn't care; that isn't the man I married."

With a fierce chitter, Artoo pulled up a holo of her and Anakin's wedding, showing them on the docks of the retreat where they'd been married, staring into one another's eyes. Her heart squeezed painfully; they looked so *innocent* and yet they hadn't been. Leading up to that point, Anakin had pursued her with a single minded passions bordering on obsession. An obsession that had both thrilled and scared her. He'd flaunted the directions of the council and returned to his home, killed a village of Tusken Raiders to the last man, woman and child, faced a Sith lord and lost his arm in the process.

He'd been powerful and passionate, struggling against the darkness that had seemed to call to him even then.

And she'd been naive, thinking that just because she was older, she knew better.

How wrong she'd been.

"Turn it off, Artoo. Vader isn't Anakin; he hasn't been since he marched on the Jedi temple and slaughtered the younglings!"

The holo disappeared and another appeared; her and Anakin on her balcony as he climbed from his speeder and ran to embrace her. A very pregnant her.

"No, Artoo; that's enough! You're showing me who he *was*, not who he *is*. If you want to show me holos, show me what he's been doing on the planets where we go to visit."

Artoo whistled his refusal.

"No? Then show me what he did on Naboo; what he said to the Queen."

The droid visibly hesitated.

Padmé narrowed her eyes at him. "Now, Artoo."

A mournful whistle and a different holo played, this one of Vader in his office. He was kneeling next to Artoo, and was hanging his head. His voice was rough, almost desperate.

“That’s why I need her, don’t you see? Help me, won’t you? Help me convince her this is her best option? Her best chance?”

“Nothing you say and nothing he does is going to change my mind Artoo. You’ve seen what he’s been doing. He says I’m not a prisoner and then I was *locked* in this room for days. The guard that was *nowhere* in sight before Dandoran is back. He’s left me alone for days; before Dandoran—”

Artoo cut her off this time, whistling an explanation that made her shake her head. “I don’t care how busy he is, Artoo, or what he told you; he’s *changed*. Anakin was always attentive and kind, caring; he *never* abandoned me the way Vader did the moment we got back into the ship and headed back here. And don’t tell me that because we were on the ship together, he was with me. You might not be able to see it as a droid, but he wasn’t there; he pulled away from me.” She let out a harsh laugh. “He was probably sick of having to *pretend* to be Anakin.”

This time the droid rocked back and forth, whistling and beeping urgently.

“No? How can you say that was him, Artoo? Until I came to the *Exactor*, how many times did you see him offer mercy? How many times were children spared? Can you give me one example, *show* me once example from the time after Obi-Wan took me away to when I was brought on board when he acted anything like the man he was during the Clone Wars?”

An image of Anakin sprung to life, working on his ship. There was no sound, but Padmé could *feel* the joy in his smile as he tinkered with the mechanics.

“When he wasn’t with you, and just you, Artoo.” While Padmé doubted it, she found a small part of herself hoping that Artoo could refute her believe that Anakin wasn’t gone. “Show me one mission, one encounter with another living being, *something* where he was the man we knew.”

Lights flashed and a whirring noise could be heard as Artoo searched his memory banks.

Seconds turned into half a minute and Padmé felt her heart sink, that small flicker of remaining hope extinguished before it could take root.

No holo was forthcoming and, finally, the droid gave a low, mournful wail.

“It’s not your fault, Artoo.” Patting the droid’s dome, she bent down and hugged him. “Vader made his choices. I’m glad that the small part of him that might still be Anakin can be that with you, but he’s not that person, Artoo. Not anymore. He’s *not* Anakin, no matter how hard he might pretend or try to show us otherwise. The man in Anakin’s body is Darth Vader. The man who promised to give me freedom and who has instead kept me in a cage. He’s the man who *promised* to let me help find Luke and Leia if he wasn’t successful and now he won’t even consider letting me look at the data.”

Artoo’s chassis visibly drooped.

“What did he do on Naboo, Artoo? He won’t tell me and I have no access to the holo network for the news story that apparently aired after we left.”

Another mournful sound and this time Artoo’s dome rotated, as if shaking his head.

“Would you like me to ask him, Mistress Padmé?”

"It's okay, Threepio," Padmé patted Artoo's dome. "He'll tell me when he's ready. I'm going to go for a walk. Wait here with him, won't you?"

"Alone? But Mistress Padmé—"

"Yes, Threepio, alone."

Padmé headed for the door, pausing to listen as Threepio spoke with his counterpart, her fingers hovering over the control panel.

"Now see what you have done? You should consider telling her what she wants to know, Artoo."

Artoo's subdued reply wasn't audible enough for Padmé to understand.

"Mistress Padmé asked nicely. You were right in not letting her into his office but you should let her see a news story abo—"

Artoo cut him off with a rude noise that had Threepio audibly huffing.

"Well I never! How rude! Fine. See if I can when she has you scrapped."

Having heard enough, Padmé opened the door and presented herself to the guard; Artoo might not have done what she wished this time, but she was hopeful he was wavering in her favor. Armed with acts about his Master he hadn't considered, Artoo was a smart droid and she hoped his reasoning circuits were still working, despite his strong attachment to who Vader had been.

Back in hyperspace and agitated from his Master's call and knowing time was running short to convince Padmé to his way of thinking, Vader returned to his quarters. Anticipating another argument with his wife, he found the guard and Padmé gone and Threepio and Artoo arguing about something.

"Is there a problem, Threepio?"

"Oh! Master Vader! No, sir, no problem."

"Artoo?"

The astromech was surprisingly subdued for a droid who normally had more spirit as he he whistled his denial.

"Did Threepio hurt your feelings buddy?"

The rude response from his friend was reassuring. "Good. I'd hate to have the two of you at odds while Padmé and I aren't seeing eye to eye."

"Master?"

"Yes, Threepio?"

"Mistress Padmé is most distressed that you will not let her assist with the search for the twins. Will you not reconsider allowing her to review your findings?"

“Did Padmé put you up to this, Threepio?”

“Put me up to this, sir?”

“Did she ask you to ask me?”

“No, sir.” Threepio’s voice took on a distressed note. “Oh no. Mistress Padmé would never ask me to ask you. She is far too angry with you for that, sir.”

Vader couldn’t help but chuckle. “I caught that, Threepio, thanks. Where is she?”

“Out for of a walk, sir.”

“Did she say where?”

“No, sir.”

“Artoo?” The droid’s answer was a rotation of his dome to the negative along with a short negative whistle. Clearly neither knew where she had gone and Vader decided against calling the guard for their location. Padmé wouldn’t be away long and, since their last argument, she would be isolated to the deck outside their quarters. The guards had their orders and they wouldn’t leave the deck. “Nevermind; she can only be gone for so long before the guards will bring her back.”

“Is there something I might be able to assist you with, Master?”

“No, nothing, Threepio; as you were,” Vader waved him away and headed for his office. “Come on Artoo; we still have information to sift through.”

The astromech followed on his heels, the door closing behind them, and Vader let out a sigh, running both hands through his hair as he settled into his chair. “This isn’t going to be easy, buddy.”

Artoo’s inquiry was soft, still subdued, as he stopped beside the desk.

Vader look up at him with a frown. “Is everything okay, Artoo?”

For a long moment, Artoo said nothing and then a holo began to play, Padmé’s angry tone filing the silence of the office.

“I don’t care how busy he is, Artoo, or what he told you; he’s changed. Anakin was always attentive and kind, caring; he never abandoned me the way Vader did the moment we got back into the ship and headed back here. And don’t tell me that because we were on the ship together, he was with me. You might not be able to see it as a droid, but he wasn’t there; he pulled away from me.”

“When is this from, Artoo?” a quick look at the timestamp and Vader let out a growl. “This morning? What more is there? Show me the rest.”

The droid made a sound of denial.

“Now, Artoo.”

Padmé’s resigned and angry visage sprang back to life. “Vader made his choices. I’m glad that the small part of him that might still be Anakin can be that with you, but he’s not that person, Artoo. Not anymore. He’s not Anakin, no matter how hard he might pretend or try to

show us otherwise. The man in Anakin's body is Darth Vader. The man who promised to give me freedom and who has instead kept me in a cage. He's the man who promised to let me help find Luke and Leia if he wasn't successful and now he won't even consider letting me look at the data."

"Who was she talking with?"

Artoo toodled a response.

"You? Is she trying to turn you against me? I *know* you won't ever betray me, buddy, but for her to try—"

A high pitched whine followed by a series of chitters and beeps had Artoo rocking back and forth between his feet in agitation.

"Understand what? There's nothing to understand! I'm the same man I've always been; you *know* that. You've been with me ever since she and I got married. I haven't changed that much. I may have gotten stronger and more set in my convictions, but it's all for her! I've tried to show her that. If she thinks I've changed so much, maybe it just shows how blinded she was to everything I was before."

Artoo chittered at him again, his tone scolding.

"It's not my fault if she couldn't see that, Artoo. She had full access to the reports during the war and the Senate was aware of what—"

The droid cut him off, whistling an accusation.

"So what if we sanitized those reports? The Senate didn't need to know about every village we couldn't save."

A rude noise followed with a question.

"That... what do you mean when did we go from saving villages to razing them? Traitors have to be rooted out and eliminated. If the Empire is going to bring the peace and prosperity that we promised in the long run, the Jedi can't be allowed to continue! Anyone who supports, hides or aids and abets them knows the risks; they're traitors!" Vader snapped viciously, "They commit treason and the penalty for treason is death."

Padmé's image snapped to life along with another distressed scolding.

"Of course Padmé's *not* a traitor; she's different!"

Another holo replaced the image, showing Padmé in the Senate with Bail Organa, the look on her face one of frustrated disappointment and anger. "*So this is how liberty dies—*"

"Stop it, Artoo!" Frustrated, Vader pushed out of his chair to pace back and forth across his office as the holo snapped off. "Just... stop it. I know what her political views were, I'm not blind to the fact that she believes we should still be a Republic and not an Empire. I don't understand why she can't see that democracy still exists and the people have their voices; we didn't dissolve the senate and the Emperor doesn't plan to."

Another rude noise was his response.

“And just when would I have told her that? She never lets me say it.” Holding up one hand, he glared at the droid, “And don’t tell me I have to try harder. I know I have to try again; that’s why I came back and was looking for her. We need to hash this out; she needs to understand that if she doesn’t publicly denounce the rebels and accept the Empire as the legal ruling body of the galaxy with the Emperor as its leader, she’ll never be able to live freely once we find the twins.”

Artoo was silent for a moment and then a soft, hesitant question.

“I don’t know, Artoo. I really don’t. If Padmé won’t do it... no.” Vader cut himself off with a decisive chopping motion, slapping his metallic hand into his real one. “No. Padmé *will* do it. I can’t believe anything else. She might not see it right now, but I’ll find a way to convince her, to *make* her see that it’s the only option open to her. I know she won’t like it. Like it or not, she will need to see reason.”

Striding back to the door that would take him into their suite, he was preoccupied enough to note that Artoo was silent as he followed, his work to search for the twins untouched. Padmé would be back soon as he needed to come up with a real strategy to convince her. Something that was more than promises. Letting her help find the twins was out of the question after the message from his Master; all of those resources had to be re-tasked lest the true reason for his search come to light.

His Master might suspect that Padmé was alive, but Vader was certain he didn’t know that Luke and Leia were still alive. Not yet, anyway. Vader would do everything he could to ensure that it remained that way as long as he could.

Padmé returned to the suite after walking in circles on the deck for over an hour. The guards with her were men she didn’t recognize and she didn’t bother getting to know them. For the moment, she didn’t care to. Vader had restricted her to the deck where their suite was located, leaving her little to do but walk or run laps. So she’d done it, unable to access some of the areas that she’d used with impunity before. They guards retook their posts as she stepped through the door and headed for the kitchenette and a glass of water. Glass in hand, she turned to go to the living area and stopped.

Vader was waiting for her.

Sitting on the sofa with a datapad in hand, he looked up as she approached and her stomach dropped even as she cautioned herself to breathe deeply; hopefully he’d take any sign of agitation as a result of her exercise.

His gaze flicked back to the datapad for a moment before connecting to hers again. “Did you enjoy your walk, Padmé.”

“Very scenic,” she retorted dryly. “The walls on this deck are a particularly lovely reflective shade of grey which enhances the hyperspace starlines with great effect.”

As he placed the datapad on the table, she inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. Either he hadn’t found her coded map, or her code had worked and left him uninterested. “It’s a temporary measure until Ventress can be removed from the ship, Padmé. Once she’s gone—”

"Once she's gone, what? You'll give me free run of the ship? We both know you'll find another reason to keep me in this suite, Vader."

"Is it so hard for you to accept that I want to protect you?"

"I wouldn't *need* your protection if you hadn't brought me here in the first place." Padmé snapped her reply and then took a deep breath, struggling to maintain her temper. "We're going around in circles. Again. What do you want this time?"

"We need to talk about your address to the people."

"I'm not making an announcement."

"You *have* to, Padmé."

"No; I *don't*." She'd had time to think about his suggestions in the twenty four standard hours since Max's execution and when Vader had first broached the subject. Nothing, absolutely *nothing* would convince her to do what he asked. "Not only do I *not* have to, you can't force me and you *won't* force me."

"You're not looking at this rationally," pushing to his feet, Vader stood and took up an at ease posture, his hands clasped behind his back, and Padmé could tell he'd marshalled his patience for this discussion. "I know you don't want to die."

"You're right," taking a sip of her water, she acknowledged the truth for what it was. "I don't. I want to live. I want to find Luke and Leia. I want to take them somewhere where *you* and your Emperor cannot *ever* reach them."

Vader's jaw visibly clenched but, to her surprise, he didn't rise to her dig. "If you don't make some kind of public declaration of allegiance, or at least *acceptance* of the Emperor's position and his policies, you'll be hunted down and killed the moment he receives firm confirmation you're alive."

An interesting choice of words. "You haven't told him?"

"When it could put your life in more danger than it already is? I want to protect you, not put you in harm's way."

"Then you should have left me where I was, shouldn't you?"

"You belong here with me; we've always been stronger together. You *know* that."

"Anakin and I were stronger together; you're not him." Frustration took hold of her, at him and at herself. "You're just the stranger that has his face. His *murderer*."

"Anakin Skywalker was weak. Conflicted. A man torn between two worlds. I couldn't have saved you as I was so I changed, Padmé. I *was* Anakin, yes," stepping towards her only to stop, Vader's hands came out from behind his back, his eyes flashing, as they flexed at his sides. "I'm the same man you comforted after the Tusken Raiders killed my mother and you *accepted* me, even after I told you I'd slaughtered the whole village, down to the last child."

"That was one instance and you were grieving your *mother*. I might have done the same thing if they'd captured and tortured my mother only to have her die in my arms!"

“And the Clone Wars? I *enjoyed* being a General, Padmé. I enjoyed leading men into battle.”

“That was against *droids*, not beings of flesh and blood.”

“And the assassins we foiled? The missions we went on? The infiltration and bounty hunters attempts we foiled? Not all of our opponents were droids; the separatists had a flesh and blood ruling council. Followers. Detractors who had to be educated to the error of their ways. Those *educations* are the ones I enjoyed the most.”

Staring at him, Padmé saw the cruel tilt of his lips and her heart seized. “Education was an important part of what you were doing, there was a lot of misinformation—”

“Aggressive education,” Vader cut her off, taking another step towards her, now at the end of the sofa. “Those who were the most outspoken needed to be dealt with. Permanently.”

“We were at war—”

“And that makes it okay?” His lips twisted cruelly, “Taking a mother or father, sometimes both, away from their children and making them orphans as an example to the populace? Perhaps I misjudged you, my love; perhaps you do understand.”

“All of those criminals were given fair trials.”

“Were they?” His voice soft, Vader took another step towards her but Padmé barely noticed. “There were a lot of things that were sanitized before they made it into the reports, Padmé.”

“No... *no*,” shaking her head, she backed away a step. “The Jedi council would *never*—”

“They would have,” he replied smugly, “and they *did*. Jedi were protectors, peace keepers and negotiators. When we judged someone guilty, who was going to question us? If the populace was freed of Separatist oppression, no one asked any questions on how it was done.”

“That just makes it worse!” Her fingers tightened around her glass as she resisted the urge to throw it at him.

“You had to know we couldn’t report on everything.”

“Standard every day operations, yes, but nothing like this. You were supposed to be a protector and instead you’ve become a dictator.”

“There was an outcry for security and safety; my Master and I have brought them that!”

“The people deserved to be represented by elected leaders who have their best interests at heart, not dictators and tyrants who seek to subjugate anyone with a differing opinion.”

“The Senate remains, with the people’s representation firmly in place, Padmé,” Vader rounded the sofa and stopped, as if just realizing he’d moved. “They still elect their leaders; they still have a voice.”

“Totalitarianism is not democracy!”

With a frown, Vader shook his head and leaned against the back of the sofa, his fingers wrapping around the edge. “Whatever you believe, Padmé, what’s done is done. The Empire has been formed and my Master is its Emperor. His will is the people’s will. Despite these minor rebel actions that have occurred, most systems have fallen in line and accepted the new galactic order.”

“Because they’re scared; ruling through fear and segregation is only going to spawn more Rebel actions. You’re the Emperor’s right hand; convince him to—”

Vader let out a bark of harsh laughter. “You dare ask me *now*? Anakin wouldn’t do it for you before he became me, why would I help you now? Especially now when we finally have a galaxy where we won’t have to hide. I asked you once to come with me, to rule with me; I gave you the opportunity to help me shape this galaxy and build it in the image we wished. You declined, Padmé, or don’t you remember?”

“How could I ever forget?” Demanded Padmé as her fingers tightened on the glass, going numb, “You accused me right afterwards of betraying you, force choke and all.”

“I should never have done that; we’ve already discussed it.”

“And that makes it okay? You’re *not* Anakin. Anakin, *my husband*, only wanted to be a good man. He never wanted to rule the galaxy, he didn’t care about politics, he cared about his *family*.”

“He was a fool,” Vader snapped back. “Anakin Skywalker was weak; he couldn’t save you, didn’t have the power to save you. I *do*!”

“I don’t *need* saving, *especially* by the monster who murdered my husband.”

“I won’t have you killed. You need to make the address, Padmé.”

“Or what? You’ll force me to do it? I know how those powers work, remember? I’m far from the weak minded fools you use it on.”

Vader closed his eyes and breathed deeply and Padmé could almost hear him counting backwards from ten as she did the same, struggling to regain control of her temper. When his eyes opened again, they weren’t calm, but he was back in control. “If you don’t acknowledge the Emperor publicly, you will *never* be able to live free anywhere in the galaxy, Padmé. You’re so determined to find Luke and Leia, but a life on the run is not a life. What would happen to them if the bounty hunters find you and succeed? Not only will you have removed them from their home with Kenobi, but they will have lost their mother as well.”

“Home with Kenobi?” Padmé’s grip slackened in shock and the glass dropped, hitting the floor with a dull *thump* as water splashed across her feet and lower legs. She didn’t notice. “You’ve found them? They’re with Obi-Wan?”

“Kenobi was seen with children; the report reached me yesterday.”

Padmé swayed, a series of conflicting emotions racing through her veins. Elation, frustration, hurt, anticipation; gratitude and betrayal. Strong arms caught her as her knees gave way and her head snapped up to find Vader’s visage closer than he’d been in weeks. His arms were around her, supporting her — her hands slapped into his chest, pushing violently as she struggled in his grip. “Let me go!”

They both went tumbling to the ground and Padmé pushed away, backing up on her hands and bum in an awkward rush to get away from him, barely aware of the water soaking through her pants.

Vader caught himself on one knee as she scrambled away.

“Don’t touch me!”

“I’m damn well going to catch you when you’re about to faint!”

Her back hit the sofa and she stopped, staring at him wide-eyes. “I wasn’t—”

“Your eyes were rolling back in your head, Padmé.”

Ignoring the statement, she refocused on his previous one. “Obi-Wan has Luke and Leia?”

“The report only said he was with children who match their age.” Vader’s lips twisted. “Tracking him has been problematic.”

“Good!” Padmé tilted her head back against the backboard of the sofa. “Good.”

“I thought you wanted to find them.”

“Not if it means giving you access to them,” she retorted sharply, her brain already working through the possibilities. If she could find Obi-Wan on her own and not lead Vader to him, the savvy Jedi Master would be able to help hide her as well as the twins. Vader’s threat was seeming less likely with this new information. “I’d rather they stay lost with Obi-Wan, than have them exposed to the darkness and hate within *you*.”

Vader’s expression visibly closed at her accusation. “Whatever you want, so long as you refuse to make a public announcement in support of the Emperor, won’t matter. The galaxy thinks you’re dead and it will keep thinking it so long as you’re stubborn about this.”

Tilting her chin in defiance, she glared right back at him. “I won’t change my mind, Vader. Nothing you say, nothing you do, nothing you *threaten* will cause me to alter my principles or betray what I believe in. Unlike *you*, I won’t take the easy way out.”

“Easy?” He pushed to his feet. “You think this was *easy* Padmé?”

“Compared to trusting me, yes!” Unwilling to be at a disadvantage with him, she pulled herself upright, using the sofa for support as she gained her feet. “None of this would have happened if you hadn’t let your fear guide you! What’s worse, is that you can’t see it. You just can’t see that everything you claim you did for me, was actually for *you*.”

“I did this to save you!”

“And you did a bang up job, didn’t you? You weren’t even *there* when I had Luke and Leia! If something had happened, you wouldn’t have been able to do anything about it. No; you didn’t do all this for *me*, Vader, you did it for yourself. So you could feel like you were doing something; so you wouldn’t have to go through another loss like the loss of your mother.”

“Enough!”

His roared command made her flinch but she tilted her chin in defiance anyway. “A little too close to home, *Vader?*”

“If you weren’t my wife—”

“I’m *not* your wife.”

“Don’t push me, Padmé. If you want to remain in obscurity, stuck in this room for the next twenty years to maintain your principles and miss *every* milestone of our children, I’m not going to deny you that. Mark my words, *wife*, if you won’t testify in public, you *will* serve me here in our home.”

“Touch me and I’ll—”

“Kill me?” Vader stepped closer and she slapped her hands on his chest, trying to hold him at arm’s length. His head dipped, his eyes flashing and she felt her body betray her. Despite the animosity between them, physically she still recognized his allure. His breath fanned over her ear as he leaned in, even as she tried to lean back. “Somehow I doubt that you’ll be an unwilling captive for the next twenty years, my love. At some point, you will need human contact, human comfort, and you will turn to me again. And when you do, it will be on your hands and knees, begging for me to gift you with oblivion.”

“Never.” Her breath hitched, betraying her. “Never again.”

His chuckle was low and she struggled not to curl her fingers against the muscles of his chest. The touch of his index finger along her jaw made her flinch, but all he did was draw it slowly down the line of it to the point of her chin, drawing her head around to look at him, so close she could feel his breath across her lips. “You want me.”

“No.”

“No?” his thumb brushed softly across her lips making her gasp as it then dropped to the rapid fluttering of her pulse, “I can feel the rapid beating of your heart, Padmé. The quickness of your breath; I can see your dilated pupils,” he stepped in closer, aligning his hips to hers and she swallowed an involuntary moan at the contact as he ground his arousal against her. “Deny it all you want, but your body gives you away. You *want* me.”

“Wanting you doesn’t mean I like you.” she snapped, knowing there was no use in denying it further, “and I will never, *ever* love you!”

“You don’t have to love me, Padmé. You don’t even have to like me, but mark my words, if you choose to stay in obscurity with me,” his finger fell away and her traitorous body swayed towards his before she could stop it and by his smirk, she knew he caught it. “I will use every trick I know about how your body reacts to mine. I will taunt you, tease you, tempt you; I will *seduce* you in every sense and I *will* win.”

“If I’m stuck with you for another twenty years in the shadows,” she told him fiercely and she tossed her head and shoved him away, “I won’t be the one on my knees.”

Her push had little effect and Vader simply smiled. “I look forward to seeing you try.”

“I won’t need to,” she told him fiercely, putting a leg between them and forcing him back, going on the attack, and turning his words back on him. “If I am well and truly stuck with you, I will taunt you, tease you, tempt you; I *will* seduce you in every sense... and I will win.

Because I know your weaknesses, better than you know mine. I know what drives you to distraction, what will push you over the edge. You may not be Anakin now, but you were once. And even though I don't like you, even though I will never love you, I will feel no remorse about *using* you for the comfort I want and give you *nothing* in return."

"When you are begging for my touch, Padmé, I look forward to forcing you to retract those words."

"And when *you* are begging for mine, I look forward to leaving you unfulfilled." She pushed him further away.

His smirk made her heart ache even as she felt it shatter further in her chest. "Then this is where the fun begins."

"No," she returned fiercely, "this is where the war begins. Make no mistake, Vader; this is war."

"No doubt, my love, but you should never challenge a tactician; we have a tendency to win."

Month Twenty Seven - Day 16 PEF, PM-PT 1

Chapter 92

Vader's Flag Ship *Exactor* — Month Twenty Seven, Day Sixteen PEF

Afternoon

Their arrival at Gwori held some fanfare and with Padmé locked in their suite, Vader met with the station head, his thoughts still on the... *discussion* he'd had with his wife. Her adamant refusal to see him as her husband stung, as did her blind idealism. The very thought that he'd been selfish in pursuing this path made him scoff and was barely worth noting; *everything* had been done to ensure her survival.

Just as now, with the Force Adept, Ventress was currently choosing her vessel and on the brink of embarking on an assignment that would take her away for weeks, if not months. The longer she was gone, the safer Padmé would be, for Vader held no illusions about the Adept's intentions. If given the chance, Ventress would put a lightsaber through Padmé without a second thought. At the moment, her servitude to him, her *fear* of him was all that held her back.

Vader intended to keep it that way for as long as possible.

With Padmé's rise to his challenge earlier, he was anticipating returning to his quarters. Would she follow through? He suspected she would. For all she claimed not to care for him, she *did* still want him. He was not above using that as a way to continue to tie her to him while he worked on breaking down her resolve. For he *would* break it down; at some point Padmé would need to accept that the new galactic order was here to stay. He would *not* permit her to return to her Rebel activities. Especially not before she went public with a statement in support of the Emperor.

"Artoo, you *have* to help me get into his office," Padmé paced the room, practically running from one side to the other and still on edge from her encounter with Vader. While she had no qualms about using him to ease her own loneliness, and was under no illusions anymore as to going back to the way things were, his threat, his *promise* was both thrilling and terrifying. How had they come to this? How had they come to the point where their physical relationship was nothing but one more weapon in their arsenal to use one another for their own end?

The droid toddled a query.

Padmé rounded on him. "No! I won't; there is no way in any of the nine hells that I will *ever* make that announcement. You know that, Artoo. *He* knew it once upon a time, when he was Anakin, but he's *not* Anakin. You saw him just now. He's willing to do anything to get

his way; he admitted to atrocities that Anakin would *never* have done in *my name*. He's the man who helped kill the democracy I cared so much about and brought about this era of oppression *for me*. If I'm the reason he did that... I can't stay here. I don't want a war for the rest of my life. If Obi-Wan has Luke and Leia, maybe there's something in his office that I can find which he missed, some clue he hasn't recognized."

Artoo's query was stronger, more convinced, but there was still some hesitation in his tone.

Walking straight to the door to Vader's office, Padmé placed one hand on it as she looked at the droid. "Because I know he's not on the ship right now. If there's any chance of getting in there and getting what I need, it's *now*, before he comes back and makes good on his threat. If there isn't anything to find, so be it, but I *need* to try, Artoo."

The mournful sound from Artoo had her shaking her head. "I know you care about him, but Vader *is not* Anakin. Anakin would never have physically coerced me; he *wouldn't* have had to. Is the way he was just treating me how you remember your Master before his rise as the Emperor's right hand?"

"I do hate to interrupt, Mistress, but if you *do* find something on Master Luke and Mistress Leia, what do you plan to do about it?"

"I'm leaving."

"Mistress Padmé!

"Don't worry, Threepio, you're coming with me. You both will. You deserve better than what he'll give you." Artoo made a sound of protest, but Padmé was firm. "I have to leave Artoo, but I can't go without at least a look at his files. Please; he won't be gone long and I need to see what's been sent to him."

Artoo swiveled his head to Threepio.

"Do not look at me," huffed the protocol droid. "Where Mistress Padmé goes, I will follow. I do wish you would join us, Artoo. It was not the same without you."

A few moments of hesitation had Padmé holding her breath, only to let it out in relief as Artoo made for the door to Vader's office and extended his (data probe) to the port. A few twirls of it and the door's lock turned green, sliding open without a sound. Patting the droid on the head, Padmé stepped past him and into Vader's office. It was tidy, except for a slew of datadiscs on his desk. Starting there, she slid into his chair and started putting them into the recorder one after another. Reports on supply lines, troop movements, notes on supplies and rendezvous and a pair of half finished reports on their trips to Naboo and Aleraan.

One entry on the fourth datadisc, dated for three days before the day's current date caught her eye. *Galactic Holonews*? Vader wasn't one to watch the news. She click on it and the holo of the anchor sprang to life.

"Naboo is in deep mourning today for the loss of Queen Apsilana and her entire ruling council when the structural integrity of the session hall's roof failed and several metric tonnes of durasteel and stone came crashing down into the room, during the evening session. With rubble still being cleared and an examination of the structure still pending, it is unclear if this was a calculated attack against the sovereignty of Naboo. Regrettably, the bodies of the Queen Apsilana, her head of security, three handmaidens and six ministers have already been

recovered and confirmed dead. The sole survivor of Queen Apailana's cabinet, one of her handmaidens who was visiting family on an approved leave, could not be reached for comment."

The holo stopped, at an end.

Padmé closed her eyes, swallowing hard as she said a silent farewell to the young woman who had reigned for such a short period of time. Vader keeping the disc meant something she didn't examine too closely at the moment, not at all surprised if he *had* played a part in the monarch's death. Taking the discs, she slid it to the side and continued her search. She would mourn later and keep the disc, along with his notes about his meeting on Naboo with the monarch. She skimmed it briefly, not finding anything in particular that stood out in that moment, but certain she would find proof of his involvement later.

Several more discs joined it, containing reports on twins that matched their children's description and particulars. Those that were visibly not Luke and Leia, she would leave behind. A brief report on Obi-Wan's sighting on Naboo and the confirmation of seeing him with children was added and, after a moment, she picked up the disc with the partial report for his time on Alderaan with Bail. Slipping the datadisc in about Vader's trip to Alderaan, she intended to skim it the same way she had about the report on Naboo, thinking that perhaps he had missed something about Obi-Wan on Alderaan the same way he had missed something about him on Naboo.

What she wasn't expecting to see was her daughter's name in print.

"Bail and Breha have adopted a precocious little girl and named her Leia." reading the note, Padmé swallowed hard. Could it be? Vader's notes continued and she scanned them eagerly, her heart climbing into her throat. *"The little girl is very attached to her adopted father. Bail and Breha have no other children; I do not believe Leia Organa is mine. She looks nothing like Padmé and Padmé is certain the twins are together."*

Staring at the entry, Padmé pulled it out and fumbled for the entry about Obi-Wan and the sighting. She plugged it in and scanned the note for the section she was looking for. *"Obi-Wan Kenobi, former Jedi General and was seen in the market on Naboo in the presence of several children, leaving with a sandy haired boy of approximately two to four years of age, supplies for at least two children having been seen in his possession. All attempts to track the wanted man have been unsuccessful."*

Padmé's hands started to shake as she pulled the report out and slipped the one about Alderaan in again. She reread Vader's last line. *"I do not believe Leia Organa is mine. She looks nothing like Padmé and Padmé is certain the twins are together."*

"But they're not," she breathed, leaning back in the chair before her eyes shot to the open door. "They're *not*. Bail, you son of a bantha, I'm going to murder you; you *separated* my children!"

Artoo toddled an inquiry and Padmé's head snapped up. "It's okay, Artoo; can you wipe the recorder's records so he can't see what I was looking at?"

He approached the desk and did as she asked. Padmé patted his domed head. "Once you're in, you're all in, huh?" The sound of the artificial sigh that was Artoo's agreement had her

sliding from the chair to wrap her arms around him. “Thank you, Artoo. I know you brought me back before with the best of intentions, but you know I can’t stay here anymore, right?”

A whistled agreement and he was interfacing with Vader’s desk. She could see him downloading data and then red lights started appearing.

“Artoo, what are you doing?”

“He is scrambling the database, Mistress,” Threepio told her, tottering into the room with a make-shift pack in hand. “You will need these.”

“I don’t need much, Threepio, just the two of you.” Glancing at Artoo again, Padmé considered what he was doing. “Can you clear the hall for me, Artoo? Reassign the guards and unlock the service corridor accesses? Once we’re in there, I can — wait.”

Leaving the droids in the office, Padmé darted back into the living area. Collecting the holo of the twins, her coded map and another small bag, she rejoined them. “I had a couple of things I’m *not* leaving behind. Artoo, can you do it?”

He whistled his agreement but added a caution.

“That will be long enough. I just need to get to the service corridors. Once we’re there, I can lead us to the hangar deck without needing to use the main corridors or turbolifts. It will mean climbing some ladders and a few tight squeezes for you, Artoo, but it will get us to the ship storage. Once we’re off the *Exactor*, we can figure out where we need to go.”

“That is not very reassuring, Mistress.”

“Just move quickly, Threepio.” Turning her attention to the astromech, she cocked her head. “How’s it coming, Artoo?”

The droid was already at work at the terminal and Padmé waited as patiently as she could. It took several long moment before the astromech beeped a caution.

“How long?”

He whistled a number and Padmé shook her head. “And Vader? Do you know where he is?”

Artoo plugged back into the terminal and several images flashed to life both on the holo and on the walls around Vader’s desk. Vader on the deck of the platform, speaking with several dignitaries who were bowing and fawning over him. Asajj was visible in another feed, inspecting a shuttle that looked more like a small war ship. Clearly her choice of shuttle. Padmé scanned several more of the security feeds as Artoo flipped them back and forth, one static feed showing the troopers in front of the suite. Several other corridors, including the areas near the hangar bay, the ship storage and the area before the turbolifts were clear.

“Wait! Go back to that one, Artoo.”

The bridge flashed into the centre view. “No no, not that one. The one in the hangar bay; do you have a feed from outside?”

Artoo showed several images before finally tapping into the feed of a security camera. Padmé’s breath caught in her throat as the reality of what that meant hit her; the *Exactor* was

docked for the first time since she had been on board. It was *docked*, which meant it wouldn't be able to follow quickly if she was able to steal a ship and get away. Her gaze traveled back over to where Asajj had disappeared into the cockpit of her chosen ship and could be seen through the viewport inspecting the controls. Vader was still outside, laughing at something the dignitary had said and offering a clear counter argument.

Good.

They were still occupied.

"They're docked, Artoo; how long as they supposed to be here?"

Padmé had to stop herself from trying to rush the droid, despite the urgency to be gone before Vader returned, and tried to hang onto the elation that he'd finally chosen to help her at long last. Her patience was rewarded and Artoo gave her a timeframe; the *Extractor* was taking on supplies, reinforcements and equipment. It would be several hours, if not the next day, before she was back in space.

Perfect.

Movement from the video feed of the troopers posted at her door drew her attention. They seemed to be arguing, one gesturing to her door, the other making a stabbing motion at his wrist. "What did you tell them Artoo?"

He whistled and then chittered, his version of a laugh.

"You told them *that*?" Padmé almost burst out laughing. "I think rearranging their orders would have been enough, but I suppose you know them better than I do."

"I am certain telling them to leave on Vader's orders would have been enough, Artoo," scolded Threepio. "Inferring that Master Vader wished them to be gone at a certain time to loudly enjoy Mistress Padmé's favors is vulgar and uncalled for."

"But effective," Padmé pointed to where the guards were leaving. "How long, Artoo?"

He tweeted and she smiled again. "More than enough time. Come on; as soon as that turbolift closes, we need to go."

"Are you certain you have enough, Mistress?" Ever the worrier, Threepio tittered his concern. "I packed you several meals, however, there is a stew in the—"

"I'm certain, Threepio." Reaching out, she patted his arm. "Come on; let's get out of here before Vader comes back."

"Are you certain of this, Mistress? If we leave, you will be placing yourself in grave danger."

"I'm in danger *here*, Threepio; I can't stay."

"Perhaps if you explained to the Master—"

Artoo came, unexpectedly, to Padmé's rescue, scolding his counterpart with a series of bleeps, electronic whistles, raspberries, and ending with a sound that was clearly insulting.

"Well! I never!"

The door to the hallway slid open and Padmé glanced at the monitor which showed the turbolift door now closed. Artoo stayed where he was for a long moment and then twittered a clear “all clear” as he unhooked from the dataport. Leading the way, Padmé stepped into the corridor. Their first stop would be the small auxiliary armory two floors down; she needed a weapon and there was no guarantee there would be one on whatever ship she was able to commandeer. Ideally, she hoped to take the *Angel*, so the droids would have space to charge and there would be room for her to do more than stay in the pilot seat.

“Artoo, were you able to see what ships are currently on the deck?”

He whistled back, a firm affirmative, which was followed by a caution she didn’t fully understand.

Stopping to briefly read the translation, she headed directly for the passage entry to the utility corridors. “If they’re cycling them to do maintenance, that works in our favor. Any chance you saw the roster and know when they’ll be servicing the *Angel of Iego*?”

His response was lack luster.

“Three days is too long. We’ll find something else, even if we have to take it from the base.” Swiftly slipping around the corner of the hallway that held the turbolift off the level and, in a tucked away corner, the access to the back hallways, Padmé headed straight for the small alcove. “Quickly. Get inside and head to the left; you want the second access, just behind the turbolift shaft.”

Threepio and Artoo slipped into the alcove and Padmé stepped in behind them, closing the panel securely.

Taking the lead, she checked for any indication that the back corridors were in use. Casting a glance at the droids, she stepped forward without consulting her map. Having memorized the directions, she was confident as to where she was going for the first several decks. Once they reached the deck she needed, she’d have Artoo plug in and check on the maintenance and troop movements.

Their trek was slow, Artoo using his jets to descend the ladders while Padmé had to wait patiently for Threepio to navigate the unfamiliar rungs. Corridor after corridor, deck after deck, it took over an hour for her to lead the droids to the place where they could really plan their escape.

The next steps, commandeering a ship and actually getting off the *Exactor* would be the most difficult; if she was successful, she’d be free of the ship, but was also under no illusion that she would be safe. Vader would hunt her.

She would just have to be careful there was no way to track her.

No trackers on the droids, which she would need to disable as soon as they jumped to hyperspace. No trackers on the ship, which she would have Artoo search to be certain. No trackers in her body, something she wouldn’t have put past Vader as a way to ensure she couldn’t disappear again. No trackers in any of the equipment or clothing in her possession.

Of course, it would mean needing credits, but she’d deal with that issue when it happened. For now, the priority was to get them to the flight desk and find a suitable ship for the three of them.

Whatever came after that, she would handle as it hit her.

Asajj climbed out of the small, deadly looking fighter shuttle after examining every inch of the internal controls. It would do what she needed it to and it was big enough she wouldn't be stuck in the cockpit all the time. The added bonus of armor plating and weapons didn't outweigh the convenience of the fact she could fly without an additional droid.

In short, it was very much like her last fighter, but with considerable upgrades for long trips.

"This one," she nodded to the technician standing by. "Fuel it, prepare it. I want to be out of the ship yard before dark."

"Are you sure, Mistress Ventress?" the technician glanced at his datapad. "We still have several ships that meet the requirements noted by Lord Vader."

"I'm sure; prep it for flight and let me know when it's ready."

"Are you certain I can't convince you to look at any more of the vessels?"

"Do you have a quota, Technician," she glanced at his name plate, "Mills?"

"Orders, Mistress."

Asajj sighed and gave her head a shake, casting a veiled and irritated look at Vader's back several feet away. "Very well. I will not change my mind. Prep this ship but show me the others. I will come back and collect it when we're done."

Mills looked relieved enough to faint, mopping the sweaty from his face with a dirty rag and leaving it streaked. "Thank you, Mistress."

Following along behind the tech, Asajj resigned herself to the inspection of several other craft over the course of the afternoon. She didn't have to, she knew, but she also knew if she decided too quickly, Vader would make the tech pay the price. For all his annoying hovering, the human knew his craft and she had no quarrel with him. Vader deserved her anger and her frustration, so that's where she directed it. Pushing it down, harnessing it, she averted her eyes and got to the task at hand.

Later.

She would be able to deal with him later.

Now wasn't the time. If she was lucky, her missions would take her away for several months, potentially *years*, as she looked for Kenobi and the Vader Twins. It would give her a chance to build her strength and hone her skills further, to make herself a better match for his technique. For she was under no illusion that her return with new of Kenobi's location would trigger the end of her usefulness.

Which would mean her death — if she didn't have the skill to escape.

For now, Asajj continued to bide her time, doing as was expected; soon, very soon, she would be free to pursue her own objective, she simply had to be patient. So patient she was,

following the tech from ship to ship over the next several hours even as her gaze kept going back to her choice. They were nearing the last craft, a pitiful thing with no armor plating and a single weapon visible on the front, when Vader's voice cut into her apathy.

"See something you like, Ventress?"

"Yes, Master." Asajj pointed at her choice, which the fuel lines could be seen connected to the underside of both stubby wings. "It will suit my purposes for my extended missions."

"Excellent." He turned to the tech at her side. "Once the ship is fueled, cross check for system errors, Technician Mills, and I want every inch of that ship's hull checked for irregularities. My apprentice will be in deep space for weeks at a time; the ship cannot fail."

Not until I've served my purpose, Ventress thought wryly.

"Y-yes Lord, Vader!" Mills bowed deeply. "The fueling is underway. But..."

"But?"

"The ship is a prototype, my Lord, perhaps something—"

"No."

Mills swallowed hard at her instant denial, his eyes darting between Vader and herself. "I will take my chances in your prototype, Technician Mills. I am *certain* you would not have put it on display if you were not confident in its capabilities."

"Of course, Lady Ventress." Mills twisted his hands together. "I'll have it ready for you before night fall."

"Dismissed."

The tech was off like a shot, darting towards the ship and leaving Asajj with her Master.

"Thank you, Master."

"If you're going to be successful and bring me Kenobi's location, it would hardly be in my best interest to send you away in a piece of junk." He turned towards the *Exactor*, docked at the far end of the yard. "Be ready to leave on schedule."

"Yes, Master."

Asajj watched as Vader walked away, her lips thinning in displeasure and contempt she could barely hide as he disappeared across the walkways. Head and shoulders above most of the humans on the docks, and visible around the droids, there was no way to lose sight of him. Turning away, she headed back to where her chosen ship was sitting, technicians converging on it from various parts of the docks.

Finding a vantage point, she settled herself in an out of the way location to watch them work. They would be at it for several hours and the longer she could stay off the *Exactor*, preferably until she found Kenobi and then disappeared, she would. Packed and ready to go, she had no reason to return.

Biding her time, she settled in to wait.

Padmé was about to step out into the corridor when the sound of boots on the durasteel floors caught her ears and she scrambled backwards. Careful not to let the wall panel slam, she placed her ear to the wall, cracked to prevent a telltale noise and permit the sound to travel through to her. Unable to see through the crack, she quieted her breathing and closed her eyes, listening carefully.

Marching boots moved past her hiding place in an even rhythm and Padmé counted the steps as they moved by, listening and waiting as the sounds got louder and louder. For over a minute, the steps continued and Padmé waited, counting the moments in her mind, even as she chafed at the delay.

The longer the steps continued, the more agitation she fought down. Any moment, Vader could discover her missing, raise the alarm and begin the search. Any moment, the orderly march could turn into a search.

Turning her head, she looked at Threepio and Artoo and lifted her finger to her mouth as the marching steps continued. Threepio placed his hand on Artoo's head and inclined his head, but made no sound. Padmé smiled at him in thanks and continued to wait.

The sound of marching steps continued to pass and eventually began to dwindle. It took several more minutes for the sound of the steps began to dwindle. Waiting until there was no sound at all, Padmé eased the portal open and hazarded a look.

The corridor was empty, with no sign of the column of troopers that had marched by.

Drawing back, she turned to the droids. "There's no one out there. Artoo, can you check and see what ships are on the deck?"

Artoo whistled softly and rolled over to the data port by the door, plugging in without hesitation and Padmé couldn't help but smile. The droid was finally on her side; she could see it, *feel* it.

"Thanks, Artoo." Keeping her voice low, despite the fact the corridor was empty, Padmé looked back to the corridor. "Look for something big enough for all of us; something that has charging ports for you, will you?"

He inquired softly as he ran through the data.

"While nice, it's not necessary, I can sleep in the pilot's seat as long as we all have space."

Another inquiry.

Padmé chuckled softly. "We'll have to abandon any ship we get as soon as possible, Artoo. We just need something that can get us off the ship and into hyperspace. Gwori is close to the core and Cosuscant; there are a lot of worlds between here and there. Somewhere, we'll be able to find a ship."

"Must we change ships, Mistress?" Threepio inquired sadly. "Surely we could reach Senator Organa or Senator Mon Mothma for assistance if we are so close?"

"How about we get off the ship first, Threepio?"

Artoo cut in with a bleep.

“That will work, Artoo. Is it still flight worthy?”

He gave a complex answer, most of which Padmé missed. Still she caught most of it; or rather, *enough* of it.

“Good. That will get us far enough, Artoo. As long as it’s able to stand the rigors of a hyperspace jump or two; we won’t need it beyond that.” Pausing she considered the droid for a moment. “Do you know where Vader is, Artoo?”

Artoo whistled as the data port glowed, searching for the data and then unplugged from the wall after a moment, and headed for the wall, chittering urgently.

“Coming here?”

Artoo’s response spurred Padmé to her feet. With a quick glance into the corridor and was out through the wall, heading straight for the flight deck. “Come on, Threepio. Vader’s headed back this way, we don’t have much time.”

“Coming, Mistress.”

With the droids on her heels, Padmé headed for the deck at a quick clip, just shy of a run, she focused on keeping her pace even. Trying not to draw attention to herself, she kept her gaze on the doors, eyes darting back and forth as subtly as possible to keep an eye out all around her. Artoo remained quiet, as did Threepio, the only sound the humming of the power through the couplings and their feet on the deck. Where ever the column of soldiers had been going, they’d disappeared from the flight deck.

Slipping through the doors, Padmé scanned the deck for the ship she was looking for. The droids appeared at her side as she was looking and then frowned. “I don’t see it, Artoo.”

He toodled and set off across the deck, leading the way around the parts and supplies, keeping to a path that shielded them from the eyes of any technicians who happened to glance up from their work. In the corner, tucked away, was the ship Asajj had been using previously. The side panels were open, wires and hoses protruding, and Padmé looked at Artoo dubiously. “Are you sure it will fly, Artoo?”

There was no doubting Artoo’s confidence as he headed towards the vessel. Padmé follow with Threepio on her heels, her trepidation growing the closer she got. The ship was a mess, clearly having been stripped from the inside out, only the hull looking like it was intact and even that looked as if there were certain areas that were flawed. Without hesitation, Artoo went to work, selecting the cables and starting to reattach them. A skematic popped up of the panel he was working on and he toodled an instruction.

“Very well. Why you could not choose a ship that was already intact is beyond me.”

Threepio moved to assist the astromech and Padmé, with a shake of her head and a glance around the nearest series of stacked crates, spread her arms wide. “What can I do, Artoo?”

He whistled a series of simple instructions and Padmé headed for the cockpit of the small ship. The inside was the same as the outside, with just enough room for two or three people to be comfortable outside the cockpit. There was a charging station, a single bunk and a holding cell. The console itself was intact, except for one panel to the left, which had been removed

and something was clearly missing from the console. The internal comm. light flashed, still obviously powered, and she flipped it.

Artoo's whistles and beeps sounded in the interior of the ship and Padmé toggled the comm. for a response. "The panel on the left is open and something is missing. It looks otherwise intact from the inside."

A series of instructions for powering up the vessel in a way that would draw minimal attention to the supposed derelict. Padmé had him repeat the instructions twice to be sure she caught them correctly before acknowledging the transmission. "I'll let you know when I'm done, Artoo."

He toodled and the comm. shut off.

Padmé turned from the console and hit the deck, going down on her knees as she pried off the service panel in front of the pilot's chair. Inside she found exactly what Artoo told her she would; a series of wires and connections that hadn't been moved, but with throttlers attached on the cables to prevent a start up. Slowly, she detached each one, placing them to the side. The small clamps had flashing lights and ties, which shut off the moment they were removed from the connections. Moving from console to console, she examined the internal wiring and removed the throttlers where she found them. Once completed, she settled in the pilot's chair and examined the board. Artoo had been very specific, that the main power converters had to come on last, but to do that, they had to get every other system, except the engines, up and running.

If they didn't, Padmé was certain, despite the fact that Artoo hadn't said it, that their trip would be over very, very quickly and in the most final of ways.

Starting with the life support system first, Padmé used the auxiliary backup to route the power, surprised to find it was indeed intact and operational. As she worked on the inside, investigating each system, what she found was surprising. The security features within the ship were completely disconnected, as were the charging stations for both the droids and whatever arsenal had once been within it. Easy fixes that could be done on the move. Additionally, the minor features within the ship were disconnected or removed, like the small medical droid that should have been installed above the charging port.

The major systems were slow to come back online. Shields and weaponry were toast, even Padmé could see that they were not going to be something Artoo could get back online anytime soon. The ship needed an overhaul, based on the auxiliary diagnostics board. Slowly, as she watched, the core systems came back online. The hyperdrive went from disconnected to active. The main engines flickered from inactive to standing by; the main flight controls, which had failed to register upon activation of the system, reappeared and went from red to green.

Together, Artoo and Threepio were reconnecting the systems they would need to flee and little else.

Shields and weapons were a concern, but Padmé trusted the droid. If the ship was what he thought was best, even with all the issues, she would let him make that choice. The comm. system was still down, but Padmé was certain it would be active by the time they needed to

depart. With the systems slowly booting, she moved around the small cabin that had belonged to her once... friend and began to curiously open drawers and cupboards.

Most of the cabin was bare, clearly Asajj hadn't planned to be on mission at the time the vehicle was decommissioned. Or, if she had, she'd been back to empty it out. Which was more likely. Digging through every space she could find, Padmé came up with a pair of broken handcuffs, a stun baton, a discharged power cell, torn items of cloth that appeared to have once been a cape or cloak and several small, empty containers.

Asajj had cleaned out the craft of everything truly useful, as far as she could tell, but there were uses for that she had left behind.

Piling the items into one of the storage drawers, Padmé went back to the main console to check on the progress of the droids. They'd been on the deck for a little over half an hour and her eyebrows rose and she saw the work that the droids had done in that short period of time. There were still no shields or weapons, but Artoo and Threepio had rerouted power around those primary systems. Where the board had been primarily red when they'd started, it was now half green; the half that mattered to get them off the ship, into hyperspace and away from Vader once and for all.

She would confront Bail first; not on Coruscant, as the droids had suggested, but somewhere near enough they could both reach it relatively easily. Possibly Polis Massa. While the base had been destroyed, it had been a research facility. All they needed was a place to meet; a place where she could confront him on his complete and total betrayal. A place where she could confront him about Leia and Luke and demand to know where Obi-Wan was; if anyone would know, it would Bail, *especially* if they'd separated her children and each had one.

Infuriated at the thought that Luke and Leia were being deprived of one another's company, Padmé forced herself to breathe and acknowledge the tactic for what it was. She had been so *certain* they'd been kept together. So certain, Mon Mothma and Bail had done *nothing* to dissuade her of the notion. It had been smart, calculated and ruthless; something Vader would have done if it was in his best interest and as a way to control her. But no, both Mon Mothma and Bail had been her *friends* and they'd still done it.

Closing her eyes, Padmé struggled to breathe through the poisonous thoughts that were threatening to blind her judgement. Forcing the thoughts of Bail and Mon Mothma's betrayal, and now potentially Obi-Wan's, away, she focused. If she wanted to be able to escape before Vader's return, she would need to keep her wits about her. Focusing on the here and now, Padmé turned her attention back to the tasks at hand.

Using the auxiliary ties to the systems, she resumed the diversion of power to each system, using the shunt as a way to bring them online without turning on the engines. The ship hummed softly as the various systems came to life, quiet and unnoticed in the back corner of the hangar bay. Padmé cued the comm. to the droid. "How are we looking Artoo?"

He whistled an optimistic reply and gave her an estimate of a quarter hour before they could leave.

"And Vader?"

Artoo whistled again and this time it was followed by a series of amused chitters.

“You did *what*?” Padmé struggled to hold back a laugh. “And it *worked*?”

The sound of Artoo’s electronic laughter reassured her that it did. Vader was not going to be happy, but he also wouldn’t turn away from the situation Artoo had set in motion by subtly broadcasting the arrival of Vader and his current flagship. Planetary dignitaries, according to the droid, had already landed, along with many fans of the handsome Sith, though the Governor had initially tried to prevent it. Speeches in the courtyard, the audience numbers swelled by the attendance of these women and men, had hindered the Dark Lord’s return. As the face of the Empires, he was forced to receive the various ministers who hadn’t initially been privy to his attendance. Checking to see if they had a holo feed, Padmé flipped it on.

The images were grainy and fuzzy, the signal leaving much to be desired, but there was a clear, if incomplete, picture of Vader standing with a trio of minor diplomats and planetary representatives, accepting something from them as they extolled the virtues and greatness of the Empire. The view panned to the crowd, roaring with approval and chanting Vader’s name.

She’d never been so glad for such blatant sycophantic behavior in her life.

Flicking off the holo feed, she turned back to her task and adjusted the power ratios within the converters leading to the primary systems. A quarter hour and she’d be in space, away from Vader, and taking the first real steps back to her children since this nightmare had begun.

Month Twenty Seven - Day 16 PEF, PM-PT 2

Chapter 93

Gwori — Month Twenty Seven, Day Sixteen PEF

Afternoon

Asajj watched, amused, as the crowd around Vader grew and grew, swelling from the population of the base to several thousand in a matter of minutes. How they'd bypassed the security of the base, she didn't care; Vader would investigate and kill the individual who had done it. What was done was done, though, and now he was forced to cater to the public, using the charming half smile of his as he waved to the crowd.

Staying where she was, tucked away at the back of the platform by the prototype that was being readied for flight, Asajj took the opportunity to examine the crowd.

The jubilation rang as false to her ears and examining the people only proved it to be true. Oh, there were groupies of the Sith, every world seemed to have them, but tucked within the ranks of the supporters were enforcers. She watched as one jabbed a citizen they didn't feed was screaming loud enough, forcing him to be louder. Another, just at the edge of her vision, was holding a blaster to a woman's side and the forced smile on her face was anything by convincing. There were real fans, though, with large signs and imprinted T-shirts, like he was some holo star. Which, technically, she supposed he was, however, Asajj had long since seen past the charm to the corruption beneath.

Let them scream and fawn and beg for attention. Vader's focus and attention had ever been consumed by his headstrong, but now bent, wife and now was no different. Soon, the Emperor would know of that rekindled obsession, if he didn't already, and Asajj was anticipating being the tool to end it once and for all. The former Senator deserved no less.

The sound of an engine rose above the cacophony of the crowd, a familiar whine that had her looking back towards the hangar bay of the *Exactor* over the tops of the crowd. Slowly, a ship rose from the landing bay and into view; a ship that Asajj hadn't thought to see in flight again.

Her ship.

The ship she'd been told was no longer space worthy.

Asajj rose partly to her feet as she watched the ship ascend vertically, ungracefully, from the deck. The hatches were all closed but even from this distance she could see there was no familiar shimmer of a shield and the cannons hung loosely. The ship trailed a few wires and cables, clearly having been put back together in a hurry.

Her eyes narrowed and she reached to the Force, searching for a sense of who the pilot was and *why* they'd be—

The familiar presence in the Force caught her by surprise.

Padmé!

Asajj was fully on her feet and sprinting for her new ship, which was still crawling with technicians, one eye on the ascending spacecraft. “Technician Mills!”

“Yes, Lady Ventress?”

“That ship needs to be space worthy. *Now.*”

“We’re almost finished—”

“*NOW,*” she left no room for argument, putting the power of the Force behind her command.

“N... now... but, mistress, we haven’t yet completed—”

“Do the engines work?”

“Yes.”

“The shields and weapons?”

“Y-yes.”

“Life support systems and structural integrity?”

“They’ve never been tested—”

“Then we’re testing. Clear out your technicians,” Asajj looked to the sky where the ship was just hitting the upper atmosphere and headed for space. “*Now, Mills.*”

Mills paled and scrambled, barking orders to his team, which Asajj ignored, her gaze still firmly on the ship in the sky. Only as it passed beyond the barrier of the upper atmosphere did Asajj turn her gaze from it and glance across the still cheering crowd, some of them pointing at the craft while others took the opportunity to slip away during the distraction.

The figure across the plaza drew her gaze. His hands were clenched, his posture ram rod straight, and nowhere was the smiling, easy going visage that he had cultivated for the holo screens. Vader’s gaze was heavenward, his expression blank, but Asajj could *feel* the fury radiating off him like a sun, even from where she was.

Slipping past Mills and his technicians, Asajj walked boldly up the ramp and into the small ship before he could turn and see her. Flicking off her comm. deliberately, she began the start up sequence for the ship, powering up the main controls without once taking her gaze from the control board. If she raised her head and saw Vader turn her way to stop her, she’d be vulnerable to compulsion.

Padmé had run and she wasn’t about to lose this chance.

Within minutes, the ship’s power was humming through the conduits and Mills stepped onto the ramp. “She’s yours, Lady Ventress.”

Asajj didn’t respond and simply flicked the controls to close the ramp door. Diagnostics showed fluctuations in the power cycling for the shields and engines so she flicked the bypass

and made a mental note to check it after she'd dealt with Padmé.

"Ventress!"

The muffled sound of Vader's Force enhanced voice reached her as her hand closed over the engine controls. *Not this time; she's mine.* Without waiting for Vader to continue, she flicked the controls and the engines roared to life, drowning out anything else Vader might say. Directing it swiftly off the landing pad, it slid smoothly into the sky — and stopped.

A quick glance out the viewport showed that Vader was focused completely on her, his hand outstretched, a murderous look in his eyes.

Having already set her course, and determined to follow and find reach Padmé before her now former Master, Ventress reversed the engines and aimed straight for Vader, throwing the power in the engines up to almost full as she did. The crowd scatted. The dignitaries could be seen screaming as the people ran in a panic. Vader was forced to jump aside, rolling as he hit the deck, his grip on her ship broken. She checked the viewport and proximity sensors and *laughed* as she passed barely 2 meters over where he lay prone, shooting into the sky and climbing sharply to escape his grasp.

Within moments, she was hurtling into space, following the same trajectory her old vessel had taken.

Her sensors already running at full power, searching for the craft she'd been using for the last several months, Asajj searched the skies for the glow of the engines. Adjusting the sensors to the frequency she knew the engines outputted, she scanned for and found a trail; particles from the engine's passing. It was strong, stronger than it should have been, telling her with certainty that the craft was operational but only just.

Padmé had to have been desperate to take the ship.

Which would make her job easier; there were only so many places that Padmé would be able to go in the ship's limited capabilities. Likely, she'd try and get rid of it quickly, to prevent being followed as Asajj was doing now.

Checking the trail, Asajj calculated the various destinations on the route that the ship had gone, clearly no longer in the system, indicating that the hyper drive was still functional. Padmé wasn't that good of a mechanic; had she convinced someone to help her? The comm. beeped, indicating that she had an incoming call. Flicking off the comm. system, she ignored it, knowing her former Master would be at the other end. She wasn't going to give him the chance to stand her down. Padmé had run and this was her chance to finish this before Vader could get into the skies; once he did, it was only a matter of time before he tracked both of them down.

"Lord Vader? Is there cause for concern?"

"A little demonstration by my apprentice," Vader pushed himself to his feet, glaring at the retreating craft and mentally counting the ways in which she would pay for such blatant disobedience. "We're in no danger."

"And the craft before?"

“Unimportant,” or it would be once it was blasted from the sky. Whomever had taken the hunk of ship junk away would be dealt with swiftly for interrupting the ceremony. He flicked his comm. “Bridge.”

“Yes, Lord Vader.”

“Hail the ship and deploy fighters.”

“We will need to gain altitude to deploy the fighters, Lord Vader.”

“Prep for take off immediately.” Snapping the comm. off, he looked towards the dignitary briefly. “We’re done. Get out. Now.”

Without waiting for an answer, he turned sharply on his heel and swept towards the ramp of the *Exactor*, his pace swift but just shy of an all out run. To run would confirm the dignitary’s question as true and the last thing Vader wanted was this splashed across the holonet with him sprinting towards the ship.

He flicked the comm. as it beeped. “Vader.”

“No answer, M’Lord,” the communication officer reported.

A low growl formed in the back of his throat and he flipped the switched the comm. channel. “Artoo, I need you to get the ship prepped.”

There was a crackle of static and then dead air.

Vader frowned, shaking his wrist and and tried again. “Artoo?”

More static and dead air, almost like the connection couldn’t get through. But who would be blocking the channel Artoo used? His gaze went to the ship that was dwindling in the distance, his eyes narrowing. Ventress. Flipping the channel back to the bridge, he was short. “Bridge, patch me through to my droid.”

“One moment, Lord Vader.”

Vader neared the ramp leading back into the *Exactor* as the engines began the audible part of their wind up. His boots hit the desk with quick, resounding steps even as his comm. crackled back to life. “Lord Vader?”

“What is it, Captain?”

“There appears to be a problem establishing a connection with your droid, sir.”

“What kind of problem?”

“According to the computer, the connection can’t be established as it’s no longer on the ship.”

“And his tracking beacon?”

There was a pause. “Inactive, sir, and not responding to remote activation.”

“Keep looking Captain. I want him found.”

No longer on the ship? Vader frowned as he turned the phrase over in his mind. Where would Artoo have gone? The droid would normally have been at his side for the inspection of

the facility, but he'd opted to stay behind with Pad—

Padmé!

Vader spun on his boot heel and looked straight into the sky where neither ship was visible any longer.

Asajj had taken off quickly following the take off of her old ship. As angry as Vader had been at the daredevil pilot who'd broken into the festivities, he'd seen the shape the ship was in and expected it would likely come crashing down quickly. It hadn't... and Artoo was missing. A hollow feeling took hold in the pit of his stomach. Artoo wouldn't have... he'd returned her to the ship before, there was no reason to think he was on board Asajj's old ship... was there?

Taking the swiftest route back to his quarters, Vader felt his anger and fear climbing as he noted the lack of guards posted in the corridor.

"Padmé?" Calling out as he unlocked the door, Vader knew immediately he'd receive no answer. Her energy was missing; Padmé was gone. Tearing through his quarters to be sure, he found several items missing and no sign of his wife or their droids. His quarters felt... empty. Lonely.

Furious, he stepped into his office and headed straight for his desk.

A quick check of Artoo's and Threepio's tracking chips and he found they were reading offline, as was the one for Asajj's old ship.

He typed in a new command and received an error, requesting his password. Several errors later and a notification of a lock out had a cry of denial and rage tearing from his throat. His desk had been tampered with, most of his personal files encrypted or deleted, *everything* scrambled or inaccessible. Mountains of data was missing from his personal archives, including, but not limited to, the every report surrounding the twins, every mention of anyone named Luke or Leia, everything he tried to bring up on Obi-Wan was scrambled. File after file was either deleted or encrypted with a rotating randomized algorithm which would make it nearly impossible to crack.

Only one droid he knew used that encryption.

Artoo!

Padmé was gone.

Artoo and Threepio were gone.

His office had been tampered with, his whole search for the twins wiped clear away as if it had never begun.

Artoo how could you?!

His desk shattered as he brought his hands down, putting them into and then through durasteel and wires, the power of the Force in his fists, an incoherent roar of denial tearing from his throat.

Vader had been *betrayed* by the one friend he'd had left... and they would all pay.

Month Twenty Seven - Day 16 PEF, Evening

Chapter 94

Hyperspace — Month Twenty Seven, Day Sixteen PEF

Late Afternoon

The ship hurtled into hyperspace and Padmé breathed a sigh of relief as the starlines elongated and the familiar feel of being thrown back into her seat pressed her backwards. In hyperspace, they'd be relatively safe from tracking and attack. "Artoo?"

He toodled an inquiry.

"Any tracking devices I should know about, and disable, in the both of you?"

The astromech began to shake, chittering in what passed for a laugh.

"What?" glancing at Threepio, she arched her eyebrows. "What's so funny?"

"He disabled them before we left the ship, Mistress. In the event Master Vader discovered us missing early."

"Oh." She flashed the still shaking droid a rueful smile. "Anything else you've done that I should know about, Artoo?"

He toodled an explanation that was more complicated than she could follow. "Threepio?"

"He says that the coordinates set are for the planet Muunilinst, Mistress Padmé, but we should not keep this vessel for long once we land. He took the liberty of... *procuring* enough imperial credits to purchase a small ship without generating an easily traceable trail. All tracking devices on myself, Artoo and the ship have been neutralized."

Artoo drew her attention back his way with an apology and Padmé found him right next to her as she spun in the pilot's chair to look at him with a frown. "Sorry for what, Ar— *Ouch!*"

He trundled away after having delivered a high powered shock, still whistling his apology.

"He is now confident you are also no longer being tracked, Mistress."

"Warn me next time, Artoo." Rubbing the site of the shock, Padmé could feel her muscles contracting with the after effects. "Are you sure Muunilinst is a good idea?"

The astromech replied with an almost scold.

"He says it is the most logical choice to procure a safer form of transport, Mistress."

"It was a part of the Banking Clan during the Clone Wars, Threepio," Padmé reminded him with a sigh. "I'd prefer a Republic or Rebel friendly world nearly, if there is one."

Artoo's negative was firm and followed by a caution against using the ship for too long, lest it fall apart in transit.

Padmé laughed softly. "Thank you, Artoo. I guess no matter how reluctant, we'll simply have to make the best of it."

"Is there a reason for your reluctance, Mistress?"

"It's where Clovis sacrificed himself for me in the last days of the war. I doubt my welcome will be a warm one even after all these years."

"The galaxy believes you to be dead, Mistress," Threepio reminded her, almost cheerfully. "In my experience, Humans do not to see what they are not looking for."

"While I agree with you, Threepio, I haven't survived this long on the *potential* foibles of others. No; I'll need a disguise and Asajj didn't exactly leave much around here to build one. Bring me that bag and let's see what you've brought me."

Asajj calculated the most likely hyperspace routes out of the system as her old ship slipped into Hyperspace before her. Setting her computer for a microjump that would take her just out of the system and beyond Vader's scans, the ship jumped, spending all of five minutes in hyperspace before reverting to normal space. The star was still visible as she was just outside it's solar system, but without the gravimetric anomalies that always followed in-system flying.

Out of her seat quickly, she did an inventory of the ship's systems, stepping from board to board and was delighted to see the only caution was on the engines. Concerning, but not unexpected on an experiential model and they were running hotter than expected, but not hot enough to make her turn around.

Nothing would have made her turn around.

Turning back to her seat, she paused long enough and lifted her head to take in the view. Out amongst the space between solar systems, in the darkness lit only by distant stars, there were few things that made her feel as small as this. Asajj turned from the viewport and took a deep breath, knowing what she was about to do would set her path on an irreversible course. Exhaling, she nodded grimly and then, before she could think twice, she entered the encrypted code for the signal she'd often seen Count Dooku starting to use before speaking with his own Master. A Master she'd never met, but one she knew harbored the same disdain for weakness as she.

The line flashed as she waited, silently, fear and trepidation forcing her to breathe deeply. He'd wanted her dead at one point; making this contact was a gamble. The call connected with a soft *click* and a hooded holo flickered into life.

Asajj dropped into a low bow. "My Lord Sidious."

"Asajj Ventress. *You dare come before me?*"

"I would not, my Lord, but for the most dire of reasons."

“Speak, before I render you speechless for your audacity.”

“Padmé Admidala Skywalker lives.” The impassive visage that greeted her news was disheartening, but she didn’t back down and forged ahead. “She lives... and she lives with Lord Vader.”

“And have you proof?”

“Surely you have sensed the conflict within him, my Lord; only a handful of people generate so strong a reaction in Sky—” Asajj almost bit her tongue as she stopped and then breathed evenly before continuing. “in Lords Vader. His errant wife has always been the largest and most volatile trigger.”

“Why do you tell me this?”

“I will kill her.”

The slight widening of Darth Sidious’ eyes would have been missed if she hadn’t been looking for it, but in that moment, Asajj knew she’d caught him by surprise and was gratified.

“He will have your head for this, lost one.”

“He is welcome to try and take it — *after* I put my saber through his heart.”

“Better swordsman than you have tried.”

Asajj gritted her teeth at the implication that Obi-Wan was better with his weapons than *she* and instead forced a smile. “Perhaps. Or perhaps... they were simply aiming at the wrong chest.”

The holo-matrix flickered and she noted a twitch in the figure’s image. The question that Asajj was sure her comment would generate wasn’t forthcoming. *“I have felt the disturbance around Lord Vader. Silence it. There can be no distractions. No wavering of his convictions.”*

Daring, but knowing she had a bargaining chip worthy of it, her answer was bolder than it probably should have been. “And in return?”

“Is your continued existence not enough?”

“I would vanish into obscurity, my lord. Forgotten, ignored; free to live my life the way I see fit and without interference.”

“You dare dictate to me?”

“No, My Lord. The threads are unravelling; I simply wish to disappear with the rest of the cast off threads.”

“I will offer you no aid, lost one. I will issue no orders against a search for you.”

But neither, she understood, would he issue a formal search once she escaped. “Yes, my lord.”

“We will not speak again.”

The holo flicked off and the finality of his words made her shiver, a sense of foreboding settling over her. Did he know something she didn’t? Would Vader reach her before she

reached Padmé, now beyond the reach of his protection? No; no. She couldn't focus on that. She was resourceful and trained; if anyone could track Padmé before Vader found her, it was she. And track Padmé she would. Track and kill.

Sliding back into the pilot's seat, her hands flew across the console as she set her coordinates for Muunilinst.

Padmé wouldn't be a fugitive for long.

***Exactor* — Month Twenty Seven, Day Sixteen — PEF**

Evening

The *Exactor* was climbing into the atmosphere hours behind Asajj's old ship and her new one's departure. Artoo and Threepio hadn't been found and neither had Padmé. Vader was standing at the main viewport, his hands crossed behind his back, one hand firmly around the fist of the other, his eyes narrowed on the point where both ships had disappeared. Calculations were already underway for every possible jump from the system, and Vader waited impatiently for the news that couriers were being dispatched to each as the *Exactor* struggled to free itself of the world's gravity.

Ships would deploy as soon as they were in space proper once again, and his search would begin in earnest.

Turning his back on the viewport, he moved to the holo map of the sector and its surrounding neighbors, aware that Padmé was well familiar with most of this area, having acted in a diplomatic capacity on many of the worlds or for their governments. That left a lot of space to cover.

"Any update on the tracking trajectory, Captain?"

"It paused outside of the system for several minutes, sir; perhaps a malfunction of the experimental equipment?"

Vader wasn't so convinced. His apprentice was cunning. Crafty. If she'd stopped, it was for a reason. He just didn't know what that could possibly be. "Has she reentered hyperspace, Captain?"

"Yes sir; she appears to be heading towards Muunilinst."

Which made perfect sense; it was on a main galactic route and one of the hubs for travel in the sector. If she was following her old ship, which was likely as Vader *knew* she intended to harm or even kill Padmé if he wasn't there as her protector. Padmé would need a different ship and, if she was able to procure one on Muunilinst, it would make tracking her all the more difficult. Cursing the ever widening gap of time, he considered where Padmé might go after obtaining another ship, but nothing jumped out at him.

"Lord Vader?"

"Yes, Captain?"

“Priority one signal from the garrison on Mygeeto, sir; they’re under attack and requesting assistance.”

“Dispatch another ship to support them; we have our own mission.”

“We’re the only ship in the sector, sir. We’re being diverted and ordered to attend at best possible speed.”

Vader closed his eyes and breathed slowly in through his nose and out through his mouth. He *wanted* to find his wife and he *needed* to follow the order. Or rather, his ship did. Straightening, he turned to look at the Captain, a man who was sweating bullets and very pale. “Very well, Captain. Have the flight deck ready the *Angel*. As soon as I’m off the ship, transfer all trajectory and tracking data to the *Angel* and make best possible speed for Mygeeto.”

“Yes sir!”

The man practically knocked himself over with the force of his salute as Vader turned on his heel and headed for the turbolift that would take him back to his quarters. By the time he was packed and down on the flight deck, the *Angel* would have been fueled and prepped and Artoo... he faltered for a heartbeat in his walk, his lips firming in a grim line. Without Artoo, it would take longer, but he knew how to fly without an astromech. With his plan now in motion, Vader increased his pace.

Padmé *would* be alive when he found her and, when he did, he had every intention of making it so that she could never leave him again.

Muunilinst

Asajj came out of hyperspace and flicked her sensors on, seeking the ship that had been hers for months. The trace of the ship wasn’t hard to follow, being that it was in barely flyable condition, but she was grimly aware that Padmé had a head start on her and, as a result, there would be some tracking involved in locating the former senator. Despite Padmé’s captivity with Vader, Asajj was determined not to underestimate her. Padmé had kept her presence secret and unknown to Vader for almost two years. Yes, she’d had help, but that help had been on her terms. Padmé was smart, savvy and Asajj would *not* make the mistake of thinking that several months as Vader’s captive had changed that. For all Vader had fooled her for a time, or she had fooled herself, Padmé wasn’t so blinded in other aspects of her life and that was something Asajj had never forgotten.

Checking the read out, Asajj struck her course for the main spaceport.

Gaining clearance would have been easy enough with her imperial credentials, however, she was acutely aware that Vader would follow on her heels the moment he realized his wife was missing. Choosing instead to use the ship’s identifiers from Gwori, she was forced to wait for a landing space for a quarter of an hour. Scrutinizing every ship as it was leaving the planet below, none held the distinctive Force signature of Padmé. Still, it left her on edge. The longer they made her wait, the narrower the gap between her and Vader’s inevitable pursuit became.

Finally, granted landing clearance, Asajj landed smartly and set her engines and systems to standby; if she found Padmé and needed to leave quickly, she didn't want have the time to waste on a cold start.

Exiting the ship, she pulled her cowl low and approached the immigration official waiting by the door.

"Welcome to Muunilinst, traveler. The docking fee is one hundred credits. Is your visit today for personal or business?"

"My reasons are my own," Asajj passed him two hundred credits. "My ship is to be fueled but otherwise remain untouched."

"Of course," the officer tapped something on their datapad even as they smoothly pocketed the credits, easily slipping the bribe and the fee into two separate, but barely noticeable, pockets. "Enjoy your stay."

Without so much as a nod of acknowledgement, Asajj stepped through the doors and into the spare port proper, taking a moment to download the schematic of the port. As with most space ports, there were listings of shops and services, but that wasn't what she was after. Searching nearby for ship vendors and cantina's, both places where ships could be acquired, she frowned upon seeing that there were several more than anticipated. Generally there was one cantina and a shop or two. Muunilinst boasted no less than four cantinas around the spaceport and almost a dozen vendors large enough to either specialize in ships, or be capable of moving a space-worthy vessel.

It likely didn't help that the whole place was perched atop a mountain range and colder than most ports; sentients would, by nature, want to congregate in warm areas for both safety and security.

Scrutinizing the layouts, Asajj chose one that was closer to the outskirts and looked like it would be less travelled, choosing to begin her search for Padmé in the most likely of places. She doubted Padmé would be so predictable, but she also knew the former senator was desperate. And desperate people made mistakes.

Tucking her cloak tightly about herself to prevent, Asajj set to work.

Padmé checked the ship one last time to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything before stepping down into the hangar bay.

The Munn who had purchased the ship was waiting for her, along with her droids. Threepio was cloaked and covered to prevent the stir his golden plating would inevitably cause on the planet. Artoo wasn't unique by any means, so she wasn't worried too many people would mistake him for more than just an astromech. She had to be careful, though; during the war, both droids had been seen in her company and together... and together they were harder to hide. It was one of the reasons she hadn't let them off the ship until she'd gone to purchase cold weather gear as soon as they'd landed. Not only did it disguise the golden droid, but she was also mostly covered and hidden; more difficult to identify.

Stepping up to the Munn, she offered the codes for the ship. "As agreed."

The tall, thin humanoid accepted the pad with the codes with a slight bow, sliding several thousand credits into her other hand. “A pleasure doing business with you, miss Lam.”

“And you.”

Walking away quickly, pocketed the credits and motioned to the droids to follow her, heading out into the main ring of the spaceport. Letting the doors close behind her before taking a breath and pausing, Padmé pulled out another datapad and flipped it to the map of the Spaceport and its surrounding area. She flipped through the possible sellers of a new ship, only to frown and have it deepen as she examined each one, even as she told herself she wasn’t being watched; no one knew Darra Lam on Muunilinst and it wasn’t an alias she’d used before. She had to be cautious all the same; her face had been well known here, alias or no alias, and there was a chance someone would recognize her.

“Is something wrong, Mistress?”

Glancing left and right, Padmé pitched her voice low. “Every single seller is an official one, which means they come with a significant risk of discovery, Threepio. Artoo, is there a way to find out who is selling without going through official channels?”

He tootled an affirmative and then a question.

“No — no. You’re right. Not here. Let’s go to the nearest cantina and find a warm drink. Even with the heaters in this spaceport, the cold practically seeps through the walls.”

Heading for several cantinas that were about half way between the ship she’d just left and the most prestigious of the sellers, she settled on one called *The Screaming Mynock*. It was dingy and dark within the halls, the outside signage boasting several private rooms for rent. Taking some of the credits the ship had given her Padmé forewent the room, and instead persuaded the server to place her at a corner table in the back cover of the establishment. It had the benefit of being near the staff exit at the rear of the establishment as well as close to a dataport Artoo would be able to access.

Once settled, and a glass of the local hot beverage specialty with a simple lunch plate was in front of her, Padmé paid the server to leave her alone.

Artoo set to work almost immediately once the server departed, Padmé digging into the meal with determination; she hadn’t eaten since that morning, hadn’t been able to due to the knots in her stomach, and now that she had a moment to breathe she wasn’t about to give Threepio a reason to scold her. He’d been admirably quiet about her eating situation since leaving the *Exactor*, and she planned to keep him that way.

It was almost peaceful as Artoo whirled away through the city database and dug for information and Threepio kept her company in surprising silence. If she hadn’t been acutely aware of being on the run, it would have almost been a pleasant meal. Finishing the food, Padmé kept an eye on the Cantina entrance. Vader would be after her and she wanted as big of a head start as she could get.

A toodle brought her attention back to the astromech.

“What’d you find, Artoo?”

He unplugged from the wall and rolled the foot or two back to the table, projecting several holos she was quick to shake her head at. A lot of custom ships were for sale that would meet her needs, but Padmé was looking for low key; something less conspicuous. A holo of a Sheathipede-class transport shuttle finally flashed onto the seat beside her, Artoo blocking the view of the holos with his rotund body. Battered, even in the holo, it looked sturdy enough and was a ship typically found in surplus/. Not having a lot of experience with them, as they'd been a separatist transport during the Clone War, the only issue was that she hadn't heard of them making long distance jumps.

"Aren't they short range ships?"

He flashed a series of other schematics before her, indicating it had been upgraded. Padmé skimmed through the upgrades, noting the hyperdrive and shield upgrades, along with some considerable modifications to the life support systems. Between her Threepio and Artoo, they'd be able to fly it. "Nice work, Artoo. Now tell me you swiped enough credits to buy it."

He chittered in a mechanical laugh.

"I'll take that as a yes. Alright, where do we find the owner of this ship?"

Padmé kept a close eye on her chrono as the minutes slipped by, sipping the drink that was occasionally refilled, when indicated, by the server.

Artoo had been able to find contact details for the owner of the ship she was going to purchase and had sent a message. Now, all she had was time as she waited for a reply. The ship, from what she could tell, wasn't for public sale, but that never stopped resourceful people. She *hoped* the seller, an Avaar Then'syal, would be flattered by the trouble she'd taken to track him down and do her the courtesy of a response. All she could do was wait. So wait she did, considering her options. The spaceport was too small, too close to where she'd sold the vessel she'd stolen; if she didn't hear from Avaar quickly, she'd have to consider moving spaces. Perhaps locating a room, if time slipped away too quickly.

The last thing she wanted to do was rent a room, but there was a possibility she'd have no choice and, if she was being tracked, a single human female traveling with a blue and white astromech and protocol droid, would bring her pursuers straight to her door. Which meant she would likely have to board them somewhere for the night, if she was forced to stay over, and then seek her own lodging. Not ideal; she wasn't thrilled with the thought of being separated from them, especially not knowing that Vader would eventually come seeking her.

I can't stay here, she realized suddenly, glancing at her mechanical companions. If the seller won't sell, and quickly, I'm going to have to find passage off Muunilinst on a transport tonight. Which came with its own dangers, if she was forced to go that route, but one danger at a time. If she was lucky, she'd be able to move from cantina to cantina to avoid detection, just another weary traveler looking for something undefined. Darra Lam was a smuggler by trade, but a smuggler without a ship at present and that *would* draw attention if anyone looked into her background.

She *needed*—

Artoo, monitoring the comm. beeped as a soft chime and buzzer sounded.

Padmé covered her lower face and mouth with a line of fabric she'd kept for that purpose, and then motioned for Artoo to accept the call. The being that flashed before her was no Munn. The visage greeting her was familiar and only a force of will kept her from flinching. *Toydarian*. She'd dealt with many of them in her time, but they'd always reminded her fondly of Anakin and the little boy he'd once been; an unwelcome and bittersweet reminder at that moment. Pitching her voice lower than it normally was, she projected it towards the holo. "This is Darra Lam."

"*Captain Lam,*" the Toydarian smiled his broken toothed smile. "*I was surprised to get your message. Tell me, how did you learn of the sale of my ship?*"

She interjected amusement into her voice and arched her eyebrows. "Avaar Then'syal, I presume."

"Yes, yes," he waved one of his hands as if to dismiss her question. "*Humans and your formality. You want my ship; how'd you hear about her?*"

"I have my ways, Avaar."

"*Heh,*" the alien chuckled. "*I can hang up if you'd rather not discuss it, human.*"

Padmé inwardly sighed. Sometimes she detested the games his species was inclined to play; greedy merchants. "You wouldn't have pre-registered her title to change hands if you hadn't planned to sell her."

"*So it would seem. You aren't one human to haggle, are you?*"

"I wouldn't have contacted you if I didn't think your price fair." *And within my budget*, she added silently. Hagglings was all well and good, but she could pay in hard credits, not a credit transfer; it was an enticing offer for any seller. Probably why he'd contacted her when she'd offered full price — credits in hand. "Are you open to the sale, Avvar, or am I wasting my time?"

"*Well... I have a buyer already interested in her—*"

"Then our business is concluded and I'll look—"

"*Wait, wait!*" she knew she had him when he cut her off with a frantic beat of his wings. "*There's no contract, so I could sell her to you for say, an extra ten thousand credits.*"

"No deal," she knew when she was being had and Padmé was no pushover. Desperate or not, he was *not* her only option. "I can pay your *original* asking price in hard credits; take it or leave it. There are other ships I can look at."

Toydarians were nothing if not greedy and the prospect of his asking price of his ship — a hundred thousand credits — in hand was clearly making him... excited. "*As long as it's credits in hand—*"

"And at a time of my choosing — tonight."

"*She won't be ready for transfer until after midnight,*" Avvar hedged gruffly. "*It can't be done tonight.*"

Damn. "And why not?"

"The ship registration can't be officially transferred and sealed until the hall of records opens."

"And when is that?"

"Sunrise."

"Sunrise then," she countered, deliberately keeping her voice firm but pleasant. "Not a moment later."

"Sunrise!"

"Sunrise," Padmé confirmed. If the courts were the reason to keep her here until morning, she was willing to potentially risk the stay — if she couldn't find another option.

Avvar huffed out a sigh and made a face. *"Sunrise it is then. Bring your credits, human. Docking bay 672, level four. Don't be late."*

Padmé raised her glass to the holo as it cut out and then, with a quick glance around, cursed softly in several languages. A half day's delay; a half day lost. Precious hours in which Vader would discover her missing and could catch up to her. With the meeting set for dawn the next morning, she had little choice — unless she wanted to look at another ship Artoo had suggested or book passage to another planet. Reluctant as she was to do it, she turned to the droid.

"We may need a ship before tomorrow, Artoo; what else did you find?"

Artoo queried her, confused, even as the list appeared again.

"I don't like the idea either since his ship is ideal, but if we can find something tonight, I'd rather not give Vader a chance to catch up with us. Threepio have disappeared before and we need to do it again if we're ever going to be in a position to find Luke and Leia and keep them safe. To do that, I need a ship and fast."

He gave an electronic sigh and then twittered something reluctant and she had to drop her gaze to his translation screen to read it, frowning as she did. "What do you mean nothing can be done tonight?"

His answer was even more complex and she cursed again as she read it. "Nothing? Not a single transaction while the hall is closed?"

Artoo's soft wail was mournful as he confirmed it.

"Then we're here until sunrise, Artoo. Let's settle up with the server and go find somewhere a little more crowded to blend in for a while." Pushing out of her seat, she tugged her clothing back into place to keep herself hidden, keeping the cloth around her mouth and nose to half hide her features. "Come on, Threepio; this is going to be a long night."

Month Twenty Seven - Day 17 PEF, Evening

Chapter 95

Muunilinst — Month Twenty Seven, Day Sixteen into Seventeen PEF

Asajj's search was methodical, starting her search of the docking bays with the attendants, showing a holo of her old ship as she went, making little secret of the fact she was searching for it. Vader would undoubtedly follow her and check this very path. She searched the bays, wasting several hours speaking with unhelpful individuals who responded to neither threats, coercions or bribes. Her invested time was rewarded several hours past the sun's setting upon locating the Munn who had bought the derilect that was her old ship .

He had been *most* forthcoming in giving her Padmé's current description along with the *interesting* fact that she was not alone. No, not only has she finally fled Vader's clutches, but she'd taken both of the droids with her. While Padmé was skilled at evading capture and notice on her own, having the two droids accompanying her, especially one as notable as the golden translator droid, should make tracking her all the easier. Asajj had kept her conversation with the Munn amicable and he had, after a hundred credits of added *persuasion*, added Padmé's new alias's name to the pot.

Darra Lam.

Not an alias Asajj was familiar with.

It had taken several more hours of time spent at the local cantinas to turn up a clue in the form of a waitress who remembered an odd woman with a droid dressed in cold weather gear; a *golden* droid the cloak hadn't been able to hide. While the waitress hadn't had much more information to go on, she had told Asajj of a conversation she'd overheard the strange woman having about locating a ship to purchase. Asajj had researched Padmé's alias, taking half an hour to read through the trail. It was detailed, thorough and exceedingly elegant, which meant it had to have been one of Max's last works. How Padmé had kept it, and Vader had never found it, Asajj didn't know.

According to the background, Darra was a smuggler and, apparently, lacking a ship. Which made perfect sense for her to be searching for one.

Asajj's next stop had been the hall of records, only to find it was closed and secured, told rather spitefully by the guard she'd then threatened that the records were DNA coded to the keeper of the records and their assistants. She would have to come back in the morning to get her information.

Left no choice, she'd continued to search for another two hours before heading back to her ship to take a quick nap. Padmé had evaded her thus far, but Asajj was confident that she wouldn't evade her much longer. With both of the droids at her side, tracking her had become all that much easier. Yet, despite Vader being on their tail, Asajj had no intention of lazing about. Her rest had been a deep meditation for just under an hour.

Morning had then come and sun-up had found Asajj at the hall of records. Just her luck, the same guard was still on duty and refused her entry with a spiteful smile. Returning it coolly, Asajj waited for almost an hour before the guard allowed her access to present her inquiry.

As she was stepping into the hall, Asajj looked left and right, finding the information inquiry desk on the far side of the hall. Widening her senses, acutely aware that Vader would be on her heels very soon, she listened for anything of use.

“—ind a buyer? That thing’s a hunk of junk!”

“—not a steal. It’s a scam. I’m telling you, it’ll be brought before the court before day’s end.”

“—oodbath I hear; a side sell gone wrong — Avvar didn’t stand a chance.”

Asajj’s head turned on the last tidbit, focusing on the Munn who was speaking quietly with their colleague. She veered to their table. “Good morning.”

The two heads separated and the male at the counter straightened. “Good morning, Mistress...?”

With a wave of her hand, Asajj smirked. “You don’t need to know my name.”

“I don’t need to know your name,” the Munn agreed, almost mechanically, blinking and then cocking his head. “How may I assist you?”

“I’m supposed to meet Avvar to look at his ship, but he forgot to give me the docking bay number and isn’t answering his comms.”

The Munn’s eyes widened. “Avvar? Avvar Then’syal?”

“That’s right.”

“I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this Mistress, but Avvar was killed this morning.”

“Really?” Asajj feigned surprise, *leaning* into the Munn with the Force to add it to her words and get the answer she needed. “That’s terrible; his vessel is just what I was looking for. Do you know if there is another seller with the same model?”

“A Sheathipede-class transport shuttle?” The Munn blinked and then checked something on his datapad even as Asajj applied just the slightest touch more of invisible persuasion. “I’m afraid they’re not very common Mistress, especially not with the upgrades Avvar had registered.”

“The hyperdrive was of particular interest,” Asajj agreed, watching as the Munn nodded, silently cursing her luck. She’d been certain Padmé wouldn’t find a ship so quickly. Sheathipede-class transport shuttles were supposed to have been short range. With an upgraded, modified shuttle with who knew what other upgrades, Padmé would be able to go just about *anywhere*. “Was a new buyer registered? Perhaps I can persuade them to part with it.”

“The sale was never completed, Mistress. The ship should still be in the bay, I believe. Docking Bay 672 Level 4. With his untimely passing, the hall of records now holds the deed

to the ship. If it meets your liking, we'd be happy to discuss a price."

An inflated price, Asajj was willing to bet. She could practically *see* the numbers spinning in the Munn's mind. "I just might do that. Thank you for your help."

"A pleasure to be of service Mistress."

Asajj turned and exited the hall, headed for the docking bays and the lift that would take her to level four. If she was right, the ship was already long gone, but there might possibly be a clue within the bay. She would need to act fast to track it if it was already gone.

The trip to the bay took some time, just based on the distance, and she wasted almost an hour getting to it. Local authorities were at the bay when she arrived and she was barred from the scene. She tried mind tricks, insisting that she was a buyer for the ship that was in the dock, even going so far as to try and coerce one of the guards with a little harmless flirting. Nothing worked and she wasted almost two hours getting tidbits of information here and there from casual conversations between the officers, caught at a distance.

It was past noon before she confirmed that the ship was gone, taken by one of the buyers. Two names were banded about; Darra Lam — who had apparently killed the other buyer in self defense according to the security holos, and Darmis Gurth, a Rodian who had apparently wanted the ship and killed Avvar before turning his weapon on Darra. A sell gone bad, indeed. The ship didn't appear to have been damaged in the firefight and Darra had been seen on the holos leading two crates onto the ship — the droids Asajj surmised — before taking off. The price of the ship in physical credits, along with the deed to it, signed over to Darra, had been found on Avvar's body.

Which meant it wasn't stolen, it had simply never been registered to the hall of records.

No chance the authorities would try and stop it for an impound.

Frustrated, but having her answers and now having confirmed that the docking bay would be a dead end, Asajj headed back to her own ship. Her time hadn't been wasted, but it had taken longer than she'd hoped to acquire the information she was looking for. She might not have the exact specifications on Padmé's ship, but she knew how to track a Sheathipede-class transport shuttle; she'd had to do it more than once when Separatist traitors were identified and tried to run. They were relatively slow and unwieldy when unmodified, but Asajj also knew this ship *had* been modified and if it had a hyper drive, who knew what else this Avvar had done to it.

Reaching her vessel, she immediately contacted the tower for departure clearance even as she spun the engines up. They roared to life as the tower came back with clearance in five mikes. More than enough time to get all of her systems operational. Punching in the base engine signatures of a Sheathipede-class transport shuttle was child's play and Asajj programmed the sensors before buckling in her crash webbing. As soon as the clearance to leave came through, she flipped on the repulsors, taking the ship into the air. Barely clearing the walls of the docking bay, she was roaring into space minutes later, her chrono showing it was now mid-afternoon.

Flipping on her scanners, she searched for the Sheathipede-class transport shuttle's signature, finding it faint, mostly masked, and adjusted, but the base frequency echoed back to her trained ear. Padmé was on a heading for Yaga Minor on a main hyperspace lane.

“You’re not as savvy as you think, Padmé,” Asajj spat to the empty cockpit, venting her anger and reconfirming her promise. “I will find you... and when I do, this ends. One way or another.”

Coruscant — Month Twenty Seven, Day Seventeen PEF

“Senator Organa?”

“Yes?” not pausing on his read through of the bill he was getting ready to oppose in the Senate, Bail Organa gave the aide in the doorway only his partial attention. “What is it?”

“A priority message for you, sir.”

“Put it there,” he gestured to the edge of his desk even as he tapped a specific line about human having increased responsibilities and *rights* in the bill, making a note to speak on the equality of all citizens in his notes. “Who is it from?”

“It’s... coded, sir.”

Coded...? Frowning, Bail looked up at the aide standing in the doorway; everyone who would have sent him coded messages was either aware of his current location and knew better than to contact him unless it was an emergency, or on Coruscant with him. “Coded.”

“Yes sir,” the aide looked uneasy as he placed it on Bail’s desk. “We don’t have the cipher.”

“That will be all,” dismissing the aide, Bail waited until his office door was closed to pick up the message. Running a second sweep for espionage devices, he then locked his door, turning the datadisc over and over in his hands, a feeling of unease settling in his stomach. *Could it be?* Closing the blinds and engaging the privacy mode for his office, Bail settled back into his desk chair. Collecting a holoreader from one drawer, he placed the player on the hard surface. Reaching into his pocket, he extracted a small decryption key. One of three that existed. If his people hadn’t been able to break the cypher, it could only come from one of two places and, as unlikely as it seemed, he couldn’t help but *hope* Padmé had finally reached out to him directly for aid. Sliding the disc into the reader, he plugged the decryption key into the data port.

The machine whirled beeped before a green light appeared and Bail swallowed hard.

It was from Padmé. Or her slicer — the one who had created the cypher. Taking a deep breath, he looked about to ensure he hadn’t forgotten any measures to protect against prying eyes. Confident he hadn’t, he flicked the message on.

Padmé Amidala Skywalker’s image sprang to life... and she *looked* furious. “*Bail. I hope you still have the key to decipher this. I’ve been Vader’s prisoner for the past six months. I’ve escaped and I need your help. Meet me on Moltok, two days from when you receive this. Landing coordinates are in the encryption. Two days, Bail; you owe me that much. I’ll see you then.*”

The holo stopped, paused on Padmé’s grim expression, and Bail couldn’t help but study her and compare the last time he’d seen her with her image on the holo. Despite her furious

expression, she looked... healthy. Healthier than he'd seen her in a long time. Her cheeks were no longer hollow, her eyes no longer sunken and there looked to be a flush of health about her that had been sorely lacking for months as she'd engaged in Rebel activities and search for her twins. Seeing her restored to health was both a blessing and a curse; a healthy Padmé would be thinking clearly and more determined than ever. That she wanted to meet *now*, after Vader had been to Alderaan and met Leia, couldn't be a coincidence.

Replaying the holo, he focused on *where* she wanted to meet him, pulling up a map of the galaxy. Typing in the search, the map shifted and twisted, zeroing in on a planet in the grid L5.

Moltok.

Bail frowned as he read the brief history of the planet, a sense of unease settling about his heart as he did. In the outer rim territories Moltok had been a Separatist planet during the Clone War and was just off the main hyperspace lane between Dantoonine and Coruscant, making it a dangerous place for Padmé to go. More dangerous than most. And if Padmé was trying to escape from Vader, as she'd mentioned, it made it all but near suicidal as the sector it was located in was loyal to the Empire.

If she was spotted...

Believed to be dead, despite the ever present rumors to the contrary, if there was ever *proof* that Padmé had survived, she would provide a figurehead the Rebels could use to rally behind all the while becoming the most hunted woman in the galaxy. *If* he could convince her to give up the search for her children. After being Vader's prisoner, perhaps she would be more reasonable and accept that they were safer, hidden away as they were.

He could only hope.

Looking back to the hyperspace lane, he considered his route. The benefit of it being on a main lane would be in the speed of arrival and a quick calculation showed that he could make it there, barely, within her time frame. He would have to delegate his speech to Mon Mothma and select his proxy for the vote. Unplugging the key and secreting it back in his robes with the disc and the slim player, he set about putting his affairs in order as swiftly as possible and flipped off the privacy setting on his office all the while pressing the button that would call his aide.

A minute later a knock on his door sounded and Bail unlocked it from the panel on his desk. "Come in."

The door opened, revealing the same aide as before. "Did you need something, Senator?"

"Contact Senator Mothma and ask her to meet me on Senate landing platform. I will need a shuttle to convey me to my personal hangar."

"You won't be attending the vote, Senator?"

"Something urgent has come up." Bail pushed to his feet, shutting down the last of his tasks on his computer before heading towards the door. "Quickly now; I *must* speak with Senator Mothma before I leave."

"Yes sir," the aide practically ran to do as bid.

Bail collected his cloak and slung it about his shoulders. Taking a deep breath, he looked around his office before striding out into the reception area. His aide was on the holo, speaking with Mon Mothma's aide. "Stress it's urgent."

"Yes, sir!"

With his aide occupied, Bail contacted the senate shuttle himself, heading into the halls where dignitaries, senators and other planetary representatives congregated to discuss the upcoming vote. Moving swiftly, he passed around the various groups, trading pleasantries with those delegates he knew to be of like-mind on the upcoming bill, but didn't stop to engage them in further discussion. He knew it would look odd for him to be leaving right before the vote, but he had the best of excuses. Breha, who was currently on route to Dantooine from Alderaan to meet with other mothers and families for a like-minded family retreat, would be passing Moltok just the day before his own arrival there.

He could claim a family emergency and, with everyone knowing of his precocious daughter's tendencies and his wife's uncertain health status on official record, it was the perfect cover. Bail had put aside the needs of his office for his family more than once in the past several years and this would just be another of his eccentricities as a doting father and husband. He planned to use that reputation to his advantage for as long as he could.

Reaching the landing platforms, he was pleasantly surprised to see Mon Mothma striding towards him, her aids scurrying quickly behind her to keep up.

"Senator Organa." Her expression was worried in the professionally polite kind of way that Senators were known to care for one another. Bail could also see true worry in the depths of her gaze. "I received your message. Your aide said it was urgent?"

"My apologies, Senator Mothma. There is a family emergency and I must depart immediately."

"It must be serious for you to miss such an important vote."

"It is," stepping towards Mon Mothma, Bail took both of her hands in his and lowered his voice. "Extended family troubles."

Mon Mothma's eyes widened but she nodded, clearly understanding his message as she squeezed his hands tightly. "Be *careful*, Bail."

"As always, dear friend." raising his voice again, he resumed speaking of business. "I have left instructions for you to vote in my place as my proxy, Senator Mothma, as you and I share similar views on the bill's amendments."

"It is my honor, Senator Organa. Safe journey. I pray your family's emergency passes quickly."

"As do I, Senator Mothma." He shared a long look with Mon Mothma, his expression and words solemn. He wished nothing more. "As do I."

Angel of Iego — Month Twenty Seven, Day Seventeen PEF

Late afternoon

Vader scanned through the tracking data that had been sent to him via the *Exactor*, holding his ship at a distance from Muunilinst as he scanned for the trace signals from both Asajj's old ship and her new one. Silently cursing Artoo for his traitorous actions, he also wished the astromech was with him. He could run algorithms better than most, but without his astromech to assist, sifting through the data took an incredible amount of time.

Based on snippets he'd been able to pull from requisition logs and various spaceport tracking signals, Asajj had landed the day before, Padmé ahead of her by several hours. Asajj's ship had departed at mid-day, but Padmé's ship was still on the planet; from what he'd been able to sense, the Force Adept had been alone in her vessel. Vader was confident Padmé had eluded the assassin; there was no public announcement of her revival and subsequent murder — and on a planet like Muunilinst, there would be. Separatist during the war, it was also the place where he'd nearly killed that sniveling senator from Scipio. That Rush Clovis was dead wasn't something he regretted in the slightest.

He shook his head and refocused, scanning once again for any sign that Padmé had been noticed on the planet and again coming up with nothing. He wasn't naïve enough to think his wife would stay with the broken ship she'd stolen to escape, yet a part of him hoped all the same. A part he ruthlessly quashed as he considered more viable options. She was either no longer on the planet, her presence was being kept quiet or she'd gone completely unnoticed.

The latter was unlikely, no matter what skills she'd acquired to blend in — especially with Threepio and Artoo with her. Which also meant the likely hood of her capture being kept quiet was almost nothing. If something had happened to her, both droids were programmed to protect her.

Analyzing Asajj's trajectory, Vader considered his options.

Ventress was a skilled tracker. If she'd left the planet, it stood to reason that she was chasing her prey; that she was following Padmé. Ignoring the planet, he turned the *Angel* to the hyperspace lane where Asajj's ship's signature was strongest. There was only one option from where he was and that was Yaga Minor. Setting the coordinates, he waited for the nava computer to confirm and then jumped.

Unnamed Sheathipede-class transport shuttle — Month Twenty Seven, Day Seventeen PEF

Late Night

Padmé stretched as she finished inputting the series of micro jumps that would take her to her eventual destination, Moltok. Choosing it hadn't been easy, but at least it was a location Bail should have an easy enough time getting to without much suspicion, despite being in the outer rim.

The route she was choosing to take would jump her from system to system, doubling back to areas where there was enough traffic to prevent an easy tail if she picked one up. It did mean her route to Moltok, which should have been just hours away, would be a couple of days.

Escaping Munnlist had been more dicey than she'd expected and the situation had left a bad taste in her mouth. The Rodian hadn't let her much choice, but she'd hoped to avoid any suspicion or attention.

Fortunately, she'd completed the deal with Avvar before the Rodian had appeared, so the ship was legally Darra's, one less headache to worry about.

The only other good news out of that run-in was that she'd not brought the droid with her in a visible manner. Powered down and in their recharge cycles with portable generators, she's loaded them into crates and had them loaded like cargo; as would be expected of her smuggler self. They were out of the crates now, but back in recharge mode. The portable generators had boosted their power, but not enough to keep them going for long.

Sitting back in the cockpit as she engaged the auto pilot, Padmé considered what she was going to say to Bail.

He had her daughter; had Leia. All this time she'd thought that the twins at least had one another... and they hadn't.

Pulling the holo Vader had created of the twins from her pack, she flicked it on, examining their faces, and making the holo blur as she touched the image.

If Vader was after her, and he no doubt was, he wouldn't rest until she was returned to him; leaving them in hiding, as they currently were, was not an option she'd ever considered before — until now.

"Soon, my darlings," she promised softly, not sure exactly what she was promising beyond safety. Safety she was determined to ensure, no matter the cost. "You'll be safe again very, very soon."

Month Twenty Seven - Day 19 PEF

Author's Note: Final Chapter before the epilogue— Jebus it's taken a while to get here. Thank you to everyone who has stayed with me through all of this and to newer readers who are only discovering it now. Love it or hate it, this ending (and epilogue) has been scripted as an idea for over a dozen years and I'm delighted to finally be here, have it completed and share.

Reading Note: There are changes between who is seeing what on narrow third person POVs through this chapter as we jump between characters — it should be relatively easy to follow as they're all marked by page breaks.

Enjoy!

Chapter 96

Angel of Iego — Month Twenty Seven, Day Nineteen PEF

Morning

Vader's respect for his errant wife's ability to elude Ventress over the last two days had increased with every jump he had to follow her.

Yaga Minor had taken him to Valc, followed by Kalee, doubling back to Yaga Minor to Ord Biniir, and finally heading to Ord Trasi. The fact that they were back nearly where they'd begun at Gwori wasn't lost on him and he wondered if Padmé would dare return, but he'd been proven wrong several times in the last two days when trying to determine where she was headed.

They'd misjumped twice but Asajj clearly had her trail and Vader had finally, after carefully scanning the lanes at each jump, found an old engine signal that had been familiar but only barely. He'd tracked it down in the database, finding it belonged to a Sheathipede-class transport shuttle — which should only have been short range. His respect for his wife's ingenuity increased; it was a signature he'd never have thought to look for.

Padmé had escaped him and continued to elude Ventress, though Vader suspected they gained ground with each jump and Padmé wouldn't be able to elude Asajj for long. Now that he had the shuttle's signature locked in, he, too, was gaining ground; tracking her directly instead of through Ventress' ship.

His next jump would lead him to a system that was familiar as it was unusual; the outer rim territories. What Padmé was looking for, or where she was determined to go, he wasn't positive, but she'd taken he and Asajj on a merry chase so far. He could only hope that his ship was faster than Asajj's and he would arrive in time to stop the Force Adept from what he

knew she'd do, given the chance. Fear, *terror*, gripped him, and he focused on it, driving it down into his chest and saving it, using it to focus. There would be a time to expel that energy, but not until he could confront the traitorous Ventress.

She had no idea the monster she had woken and Vader would see she paid in blood.

Moltok — Month Twenty Seven, Day Nineteen PEF

Afternoon

Bail Organa waited with his hands crossed and linked together behind his back as the Sheathipede-class transport shuttle touched down. His own vessel, a small, non-descript shuttle with no visible markings and no distinguishing features, behind him. He'd left his crew on board the capital ship, currently hidden among the nearby asteroids in the system's belt. He'd come alone, though Padmé hadn't specifically asked for it. The cowl of the cloak he wore was specifically to keep his identity hidden from any prying eyes that might watch the meeting.

Meeting Padmé *anywhere* was chancy; if anyone identified them together, he'd have a price on his head.

Waiting until the shuttle's landing struts had unfurled, he started towards the shuttle at a slow pace, knowing it would take a couple of minutes before the loading ramp opened. The engines wound down to a soft whine, indicating that they'd entered the standby mode. He stopped about half way to the shuttle and loosened his hands to his sides, flexing his fingers and silently trying to prepare for whatever this meeting would bring. The ramp opened Padmé emerged, dressed much like she'd been the last time he'd seen her, with a pack over her shoulder and, to his surprise, both Threepio and, if he wasn't mistaken, *Vader's* droid Artoo. Bail took a deep breath, holding his ground, all the while knowing that if the droid was loyal to Vader, he was as good as branded a traitor.

Padmé walked towards him steadily, her own hood down around her shoulders, her expression grim. She practically marched the distance, the droids lagging behind her.

"Padmé. You're looking well."

"Bail." She nodded tightly. "You're a better liar than I gave you credit for."

Somehow, he managed not to flinch. "It would help if I knew the context—"

"You told me you sent my children into hiding, to protect them from the Empire."

"We did-."

"You *didn't*," Padmé snapped at him shortly, cutting him off and preventing him from continuing. "Vader met Leia, Bail. He *met* her! Do you realize that he could have recognized his own daughter? The daughter you *promised* me was safe?"

"She *is* safe," Bail snapped. "Leia wasn't supposed to meet him."

Padmé stared at him for a long moment, her eyes suddenly sad. "You're not denying it."

“Leia is loved with us, Padmé; she has a good life and no one knows she’s more than a foundling who was born the day *before* Empire day.”

“I...” Padmé pinched the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath.

Bail could tell she was shaking, trying her best to control herself. The way her hand was flexing, he found himself glad she didn’t have a blaster in her hand. “Breha is a good mother to her, Padmé; she wants for nothing.”

“Except for her real mother, Bail!” Padmé’s cry was both hurt and furious. “How could you betray me like this? How could you look me in the eyes and tell me all the lies about her and Luke?”

“I never lied to you.”

“You never told me the truth either; that you *stole* my daughter!”

“Separating the twins was the best chance they both had for evading Vader’s notice; if we’d kept them together, he would have found them long ago.”

“They *belonged* with their mother, with *me*! They’re *my* children, Bail!”

“And they always will be,” Bail kept his voice calm, trying to reason with her. “Leia will know about you, Padmé; it has always been our intention to tell her when she’s older. We’ve made no secret of the fact she’s adopted.”

“Vader is going to know, Bail. He’ll find out. You can’t... you can’t keep her.”

“She is *safe*, Padmé. Breha has taken her away from Alderaan on a retreat that will last some time. *If* Vader comes looking for her, it won’t be because of something we’ve done. We won’t hide her away; we have no intention of living like she’s a secret not to be shared. She won’t be formally introduced to the Senate until she’s at least fourteen.”

“No.” Padmé snapped, taking a step towards him, “I don’t want her to—”

“Only if she wants it.”

Padmé swallowed hard and exhaled. “How could you, Bail?”

“We didn’t know if you would make it, Padmé; you should have died.” He searched her face. “We did what we thought was right in the moment to protect you; to protect *them*. You’ve always believed they were together and now Vader does too, if you’d shared anything with him.”

Bail watched her struggling.

It took a few moments before she she nodded hard; once. “I understand, Bail. I don’t like it. I don’t accept it. But I understand why you separated my children. Thank you, for giving Leia a loving home.”

“She is the joy of our lives, Padmé. You could join us on Alderaan; you could come and meet her.”

“Come and—”

The sound of an engine screaming as it entered the atmosphere drew both of their gazes upwards, a fighter shuttle bearing down on them.

“Run!”

Bail didn’t have to be told twice, sprinting for his shuttle as laser bolts rocked the platform, the concussion sending him staggering. Padmé was at his side in a moment, grabbing his arm and hauling him forward. They tripped and ran for the nearest cover. They ducked under a small outcropping of rock that served as the edge of the landing platform as the laser bolts slammed into the duracrete and rock, showering them in debris. Turning back as the ship rushed by, he and Padmé observed the platform. Artoo was jetting towards them, Artoo clinging to him, his boosters driving them forward and next to the rocky outcropping as the ship climbed upwards.

“Oh my! Mistress Padmé, Senator Organa, are you alright?”

“Fine, Threepio,” Padmé was short with the droid. “Bail, you need to get out of here.”

“We need to get out of here.”

“I can’t.”

“Come with me.”

“I *can*’t.” Padmé looked haunted as the fighter screamed away, turning to line up another pass. “It’s me they’re after, if it’s who I think it is, she’s not going to let us go if we both get on that shuttle.”

“Padmé—”

“Take the droids with you and take care of my daughter, Bail. Obi-Wan has Luke. Find him. Tell them...” She smiled faintly, reached for his belt and stole his blaster. “Tell them that I’ve always loved them.”

“Padmé!” Bail grabbed her by the shoulders. “Don’t *do* this. Come with me. We can get away when they turn back for their next pass.”

“There won’t be another pass, Bail, and you *can*’t be here when she lands. Go. *Please*.”

Staring into Padmé’s eyes, he saw her determination and her desperation. “There has to be another way.”

“There isn’t. Artoo?”

The astromech toodled.

“Get Threepio and Bail to Bail’s shuttle and get out of here.”

He whistled an affirmative.

“I’m not going with them. Padmé. Not without you.”

“You have to. I’m sorry, Bail.”

It was her last words to him as the blue ring of a stun blast knocked him unconscious.

Padmé swiftly looped her pack on one of Threepio's arms and then pushed the unconscious Bail into him. Artoo shifted, whistled and was off. Even as he left the shelter of the outcropping, Padmé stood and raced back into the open, hoping to draw Asajj's attention as she made it look like she was running for her own shuttle. She glanced at the shuttle Bail had brought, and saw Artoo fly up and into the access way. Grabbing her commlink, she flicked it on. "Good job, Artoo. Now get them out of here!"

He whistled a scathing negative.

"*Do it, Artoo, or none of us will. Find Luke and Leia; tell them the truth. About me. About their father. You're the only one who can. Find them!*"

The blasts of the turbolasers connected with the Sheathipede-class transport shuttle moments later, the resulting blast and shockwave throwing Padmé backwards and off her feet. Hitting the ground, her vision blurred for a moment as her head struck and she groaned. Her commlink went flying but, by some miracle, she kept her grip on the blaster. Shrapnel rained down about her and she screamed, taking a hit of something that was sharp and burning in the thigh even as she curled into ball, and covered her head and neck with her hands and arms.

Not daring to stay that way for long, her ears ringing, Padmé opened her eyes to the smoke filled landing platform, fire raging where her shuttle had been, and watched as the ship that had destroyed it turned sharply to angle a shot at Bail's shuttle. The small shuttle jumped off the platform and hurtled into space as the shot came in, making the atmosphere with the hostile ship on its tail. Artoo was a better pilot than most Jedi; Bail and Threepio were in good hands.

Padmé took a moment to breathe, found her thigh to be a bleeding mess, and tore a sleeve off her shirt. Wrapping the wound, shrapnel and all still embedded, she bit back a scream as she forced herself to her feet.

Looking skyward, she was unable to see the shuttle as the hostile ship turned back, heading back for the platform. Praying silently that they'd gotten away without a trace and would take her words to her children, Padmé turned her attention back to herself. Hobbled across the platform, she made for the outcropping where they'd found their first shelter from the hostile ship's attack and settled herself behind it. Blaster in hand, she arranged it so she had a clear shot once the pilot landed.

Flipping it from stun to lethal, she waited.

Asajj chased the shuttle into the space above Moltok and followed it as it headed for the asteroid belt. It was a short range shuttle, unmodified and very limited based on the way it was flying. Whomever was supposed to collect it, would likely be along, but Asajj decided she could deal with them *after* taking care of Padmé. It would only take a few minutes and the shuttle would have to hide, send their signal and wait for pick up. More than enough time to come back for it.

Turning back to the planet, she made a swift decent to the still burning platform, gratified to see that Padmé was no longer in the center. Good. She hadn't wanted to kill her by destroying the shuttle, just prevent her escape. Having has to choose her targets, with them

being so far apart, Asajj had chosen the craft she'd known to be modified. Now, Padmé remained on the platform, alone, and Asajj would end this.

Landing was easy enough as she took the place of the other shuttle, flipping on the autopilot as she neared the ground, and heading to the exit. The ship would remain above the ground, just out of reach of anyone without the use of the Force, or a grappling cable, to get them to the ramp. There it swayed back and forth, the repulsors keeping it in place, though clearly not designed to do so. Lightsabers in hand, she descended the ramp as it neared the ground and dropped, rolling as she landed.

The first blaster bolt caught her by surprise, slamming into her shoulder and one of her blades ignited immediately, coming up to parry the next. Her arm spasmed, numb from the shoulder down, the blade in her right hand dropping from her nerveless fingers as they lost their grip.

"You should have made the first shot count, Padmé," Asajj taunted as another bolt came screaming towards her head and she deflected it back along its trajectory, the smoke on the platform making it difficult for her to spot her prey. "You can't escape me. It is only a matter of time before I find you and kill you."

"You can try, Asajj," Padmé taunted back, the vastness of the platform not giving away her position. "I won't be easy to kill."

"You'll be easier than most!" flicking off the blade which made her a target, Asajj clipped it to her belt even as she used the Force to jump out of the way of the next bolt, stretching out with the Force to bring her lost blade to her hand. Several more blaster bolts slammed into the space where she'd been moments ago, and she smiled. Following that trajectory, she used the Force to lift and throw a rock, experimenting with distance. It clattered to the ground, another followed the first, disappearing into the smoke. It hit solid rock; not the ground, but a berm. The landing pad was lined by a berm on the left side; she'd seen it when Padmé had taken refuge during her strafing run.

"Vader's coming for me, Asajj; think you can kill me before he gets here?"

"Vader won't save you now, *Lady Vader*," Asajj taunted, throwing another rock, but knowing there was some truth to Padmé's statement. If Vader arrived before Asajj was able to land the killing blow, she'd be fighting for her life before ending the reason for his. "He's too far behind."

"Who are you trying to convince, Ventress?" Another bolt came from the same direction as before, along a slightly different trajectory, passing to Asajj's left. "Me? Or you?"

Asajj cackled, using the Force to throw a shower of rocks towards where the bolt had originated from. A strangled cry told her she'd met her mark and she slinked in that direction, crossing the ground carefully. Padmé was an excellent shot. Her fingers were numb, starting to tingle with returned feeling, but it would be some time before it fully returned. Lightsaber in hand, she crept across the debris on the landing pad, searching the smoke as it was starting to thin, giving her a wider range of vision. Her lightsaber came up to block another blast, one that would have impacted her head, deflecting it away.

"Still think I need saving?"

Choosing not to answer as she flicked the saber off and jumped away, using the Force to cushion her fall and prevent any sound, she watched the blaster bolts strike where she'd been, passing through the dissipating smoke. The roar of an engine entering the atmosphere and the sudden chill that engulfed her, told Asajj that her time was running out.

Vader had arrived and, if she didn't kill Padmé quickly, she'd never get another chance.

Vader headed straight for the burning debris on the landing pad where the signal of Ventress' ship had stopped. As the burn from the atmosphere cleared the cockpit canopy, he could see the tiny flashes of a lightsaber and those of blaster bolts flying through the smoke cloud below. Relief hit him so hard he just about collapsed in the chair. Padmé was *alive*; he'd arrived in time.

Flipping on the auto pilot, he broke out of his crash webbing and headed for the ramp, lightsaber in hand.

Vader had no time to waste.

Ventress was about to pay for daring to entertain the notion of touching what was his... and Padmé...

He'd deal with his errant wife once they were safely away.

The ramp lowered with agonizing slowness, wind whipped his cloak and clothes about and, without so much as a second thought, he dove out of the ship.

Padmé looked skyward as the sound of the ship reached her, recognizing the engine with a sense of disbelief. The silhouette of the *Angel of Iego* made itself known through the swiftly dissipating smoke and, even as she watched, a figure jumped from several hundred feet up.

She knew that tactic.

Vader had arrived.

"Do you think you're saved, Padmé?" Asajj taunted easily. "What do you think he'll do to you once you're back in his gilded cage?"

"While he kills you," she returned, catching the Force Adept's shadow approaching her and rolling to line up her next few shot, she let loose, and the red lightsaber sprang to life, "I was thinking of stealing your ship."

Bolts came back along their trajectory and Padmé rolled to avoid them, keeping her line of sight on Asajj as she squeezed off another few bolts, hoping Bail had charged his blaster's clip to full. The blaster answered, bolts going high and low, forcing Asajj to block high and low. Her first shot had missed her head, but she'd obviously connected; the Force Adept wasn't using both sabers.

The blaster was suddenly pulled from her grip and Padmé let out a yell of denial as she was suddenly following its trajectory as she was pulled from her perch and sent hurtling

through the air.

“Padmé!”

It was Anakin’s voice that reached her ears, that familiar, desperate call that she’d heard so many times in her life time; a familiar call that was far away.

Too far away.

She stopped suddenly, her arms and legs thrown forward like a doll’s. Asajj’s face was right before her, the malevolent ice-blue eyes that had once held respect, devoid of any softness. As she stared into Asajj’s eyes, the burning of the lightsaber in her gut made itself known, her insides on fire as the blade sliced through her stomach and upwards, through her internal organs and out through her back. Agony shredded her control and she screamed when Asajj twisted the lightsaber.

“PADMÉ!”

Her body was pushed backwards and the lightsaber disappeared.

The burning remained, as Padmé crumpled to the ground, red lightsaber meeting red lightsaber as Vader’s wrath descended.

As Padmé was Force pushed beyond her reach, Asajj spun to face Vader as he leapt at her, his lightsaber already in hand, coming down in a powerful overhanded chop.

“I will kill you, Ventress!”

Of that she had no doubt.

Not wasting breath to reply, her second lightsaber came off her belt into a hand that was barely functional even as she twirled away, her left handed sabre parrying the overhanded chop on one edge to give her space to move. Asajj felt the impact even as the blade was deflected away. Another block followed by a quick duck and a dip to step out of harm’s way had her spinning around him. Their blades clashed, a symphony of electricity humming and slicking through the air.

Vader was relentless.

He moved in before she could catch herself, their blades clashing one after another. He tried to Force choke her and Asajj countered with a Force push, knocking him back as she danced backwards. She couldn’t let him catch her like that. Flipping away, she landed in a crouch, sparing a desperate glance towards her craft. If she could get to her ship—

“You will die.”

Her head snapped back just as a thrown lightsaber blade came twirling towards her, a scythe of death, and her right hand snapped out to meet it.

It promptly hit the ground as the spinning blade dipped at the last second and took her arm off just below the shoulder. Both blades, her and his, winked out of existence as she

screamed, dropping to her knees as the shock of the fallen limb momentarily immobilized her body as her brain struggled to process the change.

It was a fatal moment and Vader was on her before she recovered.

Vader stalked in as Ventress went to her knees, a part of his recognizing the shocked look on her face as one he'd worn a life time ago after his battle with her former master on Geonosis. Losing a limb was a traumatic experience; the brain couldn't process what had happened and needed time to understand what it was seeing. Time to recover. Despite having *this* in common, he felt nothing.

He felt no pity for her, no sense of remorse.

She had stabbed Padmé.

She had tried to kill his wife, and she was a threat he needed to eliminate.

Vader's lightsaber came up, sweeping towards her neck, only to be deflected as she lifted her still good arm to meet it. There was still fight in her, but it was weak. He used the Force to grip her neck, lifting her into the air and immediately *squeezed* as she began to gasp for air, shaking her in the grasp like a puppet with cut strings. Her remaining lightsaber dropped to the ground as she used her left overhand to grab at the invisible hand. Vader dropped her immediately as he stepped close and wrapped his *real* hand around her neck, replacing the phantom fingers with physical ones.

"No mercy. No quarter."

His fingers dug into the tendons of her neck, crushing her wind pipe as he funneled the whole of his Force powers into his grip. Her nails dug into the back of his hand, tearing skin and drawing blood as she attempted to break his grip, his hold driving her towards the ground so she couldn't use her legs to kick him. Bones gave and shattered under his fingers with an audible *crack*, tendons and ligaments popping with satisfying certainty as her final gurgle of desperation left her lips. Skin gave and blood coated his finger tips.

"And here, you die."

Her eyes bulged, her tongue emerging from between her lips as her pupils suddenly glazed over and she went limp in his grasp, her hand dropping away from his, twitching at her side. Her windpipe crushed and the bones in her neck all but jelly, he dropped her to the ground and discarded her corpse without a second thought.

The threat she had been, was terminated.

Spinning on his heel, Vader sprinted back to Padmé; she would need medical attention and fast. Pressing the button on his wrist, he called the *Angel* in for a landing.

Padmé was dying

She knew it, could *feel* it.

The burning in her body was turning to ice, feeling disappearing as numbness slowly crept upwards, as if she was being covered in an ice blanket.

She fought it, knowing she couldn't die yet; not until she'd spoken with Anakin again, not until she'd let him know what she'd seen. What she *knew* despite everything. That she *knew* he'd have been a wonderful father and husband if he'd been given the chance. That yes, she'd always known of his darker tendencies, but couldn't accept being the catalyst for the destruction of everything they'd held dear. That she hadn't been able to save him, but, someday, their children would bring him back to the light. There, at the end, she had to believe it; had to believe there was still good in him.

Padmé heard the clash of sabers on the periphery of her consciousness, knowing Anakin was fighting her killer.

He would win, he *always* won, and she clung to the sound, knowing if she let go, she'd never get to say all she wanted to.

"Anakin."

His name left her lips, barely audible as she pressed her hands to the charred and torn hole in her body, unable to feel her hands but *knowing* they were where she needed them to be.

The sound of lightsabers seemed so far away, and suddenly ceased, leaving her with nothing to focus on except the slowly creeping cold in her veins, her body now completely numb from the waist down. Her head turned as footsteps came close, tears sliding down her cheeks when she realized everything was edged in black and her vision was blurred.

"Anakin..."

"I'm here." His beloved face was suddenly before her, his hand sliding around her back, one hand taking hers and bringing it to his lips as he clutched her close. "I'm here, Padmé. Hold on, my love, I need to get you help."

"Too late... I won't... Anakin—"

"No. Don't say that," tears filled his eyes as he shook his head in denial. "Don't say that... I can save you. I—"

"Ani."

"I can't lose you too, Padmé."

"No choice..." she gasped, struggling to breathe, 'I found you.' She nodded, flattening her palm against his face, barely able to feel his skin through her fingertips. "Let me go."

"I *can't*." His cry was ragged. "I can't. Not when I finally found you again."

"You're... better," she coughed, struggling to continue speaking as the ice crept up over her belly, "better than this, Ani."

"I can't be without you." He pressed her hand to his cheeks. "Please... please Padmé. Stay with me. You make me better, you always have."

"The good..." the ice was creeping into her chest, and Padmé knew there wasn't much time as the feel of his arm around her back faded to nothing. "is in you, Ani."

“Padmé... *Angel*, please.”

“They’ll find you... one day...” darkness was edging her vision further, narrowing it to just his terrified and grief-stricken eyes, “and you’ll... see...”

“Padmé?”

Her eyes closed and Padmé could feel her body go limp, her consciousness fading. Ice spread through her chest, driving away the feeling in her body, even as she could clearly hear everything Anakin was saying. Ice continued to climb, pressed back only by the warm feeling of his lips on hers, the temporary relief short lived as he pressed them twice more before a wild cry tore from his lips. The cold stretched through the last of her body, her consciousness fading further and further, as if she was slipping into sleep.

As sensation dwindled, she could hear Anakin calling her name in desperation, pleading with her to stay. Pleading with her not to leave him.

The sound of her name on his lips, echoing through the sky with heartrending, soul crushing denial, was the last thing she ever heard.

“*Padmé! NO!*”

Time stood still as Vader held his wife to his chest, clutching her limp and cooling body in his arms, tears soaking her hair. How long he stayed there, with her in his arms, he didn’t know.

Grief stricken, Vader vowed the galaxy would pay for what it had stolen from him for the last time.

Loading Padmé’s body onto the *Angel*, he programmed the freighter to fly into the system’s sun. He then boarded the experimental fighter that Asajj had chosen, taking it for his new ship. Vader watched long enough to see the *Angel* enter the sun’s sphere and disintegrate before turning his attention to the ship that was now his.

Tears blurred his eyes, tears he made no move to wipe away, as he noted a ship’s signature still locked in the scanner. With a flick of his wrist, Vader wiped the information without more than a quick, blurred glance. He had no need of the scan with the ship a pile of slag on the landing platform below.

Unable to think of what else to do, he called up the nav computer database, numbly looking at the names of the planets and wondering where he should go.

His comm. signaled an incoming transmission; a transmission from his Master. Transferring the control of the transmission to the ship from his personal comm., Vader

A quick rub of his face with his mechanical hand, a deep breath and then a second, he flicked the button to activate it and took a knee, bowing his head respectfully. “My Master.”

“*I sense a great disturbance in you, Lord Vader.*”

“The Adept is dead, Master,” Vader told him coldly, clenching his fingers. His hand was still red with her blood where his finger tips had punctured the skin of her neck. He wished

he'd not killed her so swiftly; she deserved to die a thousand deaths for her actions — and then more. "As you commanded."

"Did she take something from you, my boy?"

Vader flinched, unable to speak, so great was his grief and his rage.

"I see." The Emperor regarded him knowingly and in that moment, Vader was certain he did. His tone was understanding; the *friend* Vader had once known and the mentor he continued to be. *"Go to Mygeeto. Eliminate every rebel, everyone whispered to have had dealings or sympathies for this rebellion. Wipe the world clean and make it known. Broadcast your victory. You will make the galaxy fear you once again, Lord Vader."*

Just the balm he needed for his shattered heart. "Yes, Master."

The holo flickered out.

Mygeeto.

Vader rose to his feet and settled into the pilot's chair, numb and yet agonizingly broken. Refocusing on his Master's directive, he clung to it like a lifeline.

His fleet was still dealing with insurgents, not having quelled the issues as quickly as he would have completed the operation had he been there. He would fix that. Checking the nav computer, he programmed the coordinated and made the jump.

Less than an hour later, he was raining havoc and hell down on the galaxy, staring with Mygeeto.

Padmé's death has stolen his light and purpose for anything but a vessel for darkness.

The galaxy would pay for her death; it would be as bereft of hope and light as he was inside.

For the next seventeen years he would rain death and destruction down on those who would dare oppose his Empire; it would take the emergence of one Luke Skywalker at the Battle of Yavin IV to change everything.

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Epilogue

Disclaimer: The sequences at the start are from *Return of the Jedi* and used without permission, tweaked to fit the universe where Anakin is not in the suit. As ever, no money is made from this work and ROTJ is the property of Lucasfilm; enjoy.

Epilogue

The Death Star — Above the Endor Moon — 23 years later

Emperor's throne room

"Sister. Ah yes; your *twin* sister. Your feelings have now betrayed her too." Vader told his son with relish, *pushing* him to release his anger by daring to threaten his only other family. He could remember a time when he'd wanted nothing but to have his children with him; a time that had long since passed... a time that had died with his wife. "If you will not turn to the dark side, then perhaps she *will*."

"NO!"

Vader spun towards the shout as Luke's green blade sprang to life, his son lunging at him with a vicious slice, driving him backwards, fueled by his fear and terror, pushing him back towards the catwalk. He countered, blocking and parrying, on the defensive, the power of his son's fear making him suddenly uneasy as he struggled to match the ferocity of the attack. His blood flowed through Luke's veins; was it possible his son could best him?

Vader stumbled and fell, misjudging the catwalk, his free hand grabbing the rail to prevent his plunge into the chasm of the reactor, but Luke came on relentlessly. Giving no quarter, he struck downwards on Vader's lightsaber, hammering it again and again, giving him no chance to correct his posture or grip, until, finally, Luke's lightsaber cleaved through the metal of Vader's artificial hand, taking both the limb and the blade with it.

Vader cried out, the searing pain in his wrist no different for it being his mechanical hand; his own fault.

Gripping the sparking stump with his good hand, Vader stared at his son in surprise and fear, waiting for the killing blow to fall.

Only it never came.

His Master's delighted laughter echoed through the chamber. "Good!"

Through his pain and fear, Vader turned his gaze to his Master even as his son did the same.

"Your hate has made you powerful. Now... fulfill your destiny. Take your father's place at my side."

Luke's gaze met his own, ice blue eyes meeting ice blue eyes, before Luke's gaze dropped to his mechanical hand. Vader could practically *see* the wheels turning in Luke's head before his son stood tall, turned to face the Emperor. "Never." Luke promptly threw away his lightsaber. "I'll never turn to the dark side. You've failed your highness. I am a Jedi. Like my father before me."

The Emperor stared impassively. "So be it. Jedi." His hands were coming up, and Vader knew what would be coming next. He'd been on the receiving end more times than he cared to count, seen others on the receiving end when they'd disappointed the Sith lord. "If you will not be turned, you will be *destroyed*."

Lightning arced from the Emperor's hands, driving Luke away and down, nearly into the reactor shaft with a cry of pain and surprise. Luke caught himself on one of the control consoles near the edge as lightning ripped through his body, the reaction of his muscles clearly driving his grip.

Vader pushed to his feet, keeping his injured hand close to his body as he slowly stepped clear of the attack, his Master giving him the opening to move back towards the Emperor's side.

"Young fool." There was disappointment in the Emperor's voice, a tone Vader hated to hear when it was directed at *him*, as his Master stepped down the last of the steps to the landing and slowly approached Luke. "Only now at the end... do you understand?"

Part of Vader wanted to cry out, to warn his son, to tell him... to *plead* with him to submit and accept; to do what he needed to *live*... yet his voice was trapped in his throat.

Years of obedience and training kept him mute.

Luke gasped and pained with pain, struggling to regain his senses as he pulled himself back from the brink, gripping the console that had prevented his fall and struggling to find a new grip.

Even as his son struggled, Vader took his place just beyond the catwalk bridge even as Luke continued to try and pull himself upwards and further away from the chasm behind him. The Emperor continue to approach slowly, hands outstretched, until he stopped within a few feet of the young man.

"Your feeble skills are no match for the power of the dark side." Power arced from the Emperor's fingertips and ripped into Luke, driving him from the console and back onto the platform, face down with a cry and a gasp. "You will pay the price for your lack of *vision*."

Vader stepped back to his Master's side as the power of the dark side ripped into his son over and over again, his body jerking and

"Father *please*." Luke cried out to him, writhing helplessly in the throes of the Emperor's attack. "Help.. me...!"

"*You're better... better than this, Ani.*"

Padmé's voice echoed in his mind, her last words suddenly present as if she were there before him; words he'd blocked for so long, the pain they'd brought beyond even his ability to endure. The image of her in her last moments flickered behind his eyes. Lovely, even in her

final moments, her eyes so, so *sad* and yet hopefully — for him. His son’s cry brought him back to the moment.

“AHHHH!

“And now young Skywalker, you will die.”

Vader looked to his Master before looking back to his son, gasping and clutching himself in pain.

Surely the Emperor meant it only as a threat? Looking back to the Emperor, Vader understood it was *not*. Luke would die; here and now. For having the audacity to thwart the Emperor’s plans and not follow in Vader’s foot steps. For refusing to give in and submit to his greater power, Luke would die.

The Emperor’s teeth flashed, visible through the side of his hood as his full rage was channeled into the young man on the floor; Vader’s head turned helplessly back to his son.

The flashing light of the force lightning attack sent his mind spinning back to the landing pad on Moltok, suddenly *there* again, with Padmé in his arms.

“The good...” her voice was weak and getting weaker as he clutched her desperately, willing the Force to empower him to save her... and nothing happened. He was helpless. in the face of her fate. “...is in you, Ani.”

“Padmé... Angel,” he begged, pleading with her not to go, with the universe, not to take her. “please.”

“They’ll find you... one day...” Luke and Leia; she spoke of Luke and Leia. She was dying and her last thoughts were for them — for him — and not herself. “and you’ll... see...”

Lightning arced mercilessly from the hands of the Emperor, driving into Luke’s body and making him writhe, agonized, paralyzed and helpless to resist.

Vader looked at his son and looked at his Master, watching each, back and forth and back again as Luke’s gaze connected with his in desperation.

“*Father!*”

Anakin looked back at the man who had held his leash for so long, made promises he hadn’t kept; the mentor who had taken his fear and anger and pain and turned it against the galaxy all for his own purpose.

There was no question now of what he had to do; he had to save his *son*.

Stepping into the man who had pretended to be his friend to gain his trust, only to make him a slave once more, Anakin grabbed the Emperor around the waist and lifted him off the ground.

The Emperor cried out in surprise, his hands snapping back as the lightning left Luke and sprayed the room, slamming into the top of Vader’s head.

Pain arced through his muscles, making them clench and spasm, much like they had his son’s, as the Emperor’s hands were suddenly there above him, lighting ripping into the bones of his skull. Blackness edged his vision as he *felt* the impact of the electricity clear through to

the bones in his toes. This close, this the strength of the Emperor's fear and anger drove straight into his skull and soft tissue, blurring his vision and making his muscles spasm. Years of enduring the onslaught of the Emperor's wrath hadn't made him immune, but Anakin remained able to function.

Barely.

Stumbling, his steps shifting and slow as the Emperor wriggled in his grasp to be free, Anakin sought only one outcome. To end the threat; to make it so that the Emperor could never harm a member of his family again; never *take* someone from him again.

Anakin would ensure his son would live; what became of him once the threat was gone was inconsequential.

That will drove him forward even as he felt the clouding in his mind as the lightning drove into soft tissue with deadly intent. His steps continued, haltingly, the seven steps it would take to get to the end of the chasm and eternity, each more difficult than the last.

But Anakin would *not* fail his family again. He would *not*—

His knee hit the rail, his shin crashing into the console.

Anakin pitched forward, tripping and used the momentum to *push* forward, the Emperor's body pitching and swinging with a scream as he slipped over the side and into the chasm.

The cry was suddenly cut off as the Emperor impacted the base of the shaft, striking the shielding and an explosion rocked the room, the shock wave nearly knocking him back.

Anakin took a knee, leaning heavily against the console as lightning continued to race through his body, his lungs burning as he struggled to breathe, the internal damage from his proximity to the Emperor during the attack making it all the worse. He was dying; he could feel it. The Force lightning had done its work and he would not recover from this.

The unexpected feel of Luke's hands on his shoulders as he was lifted from the console and drawn backwards, into his arms, had him looking up in surprise.

"Father."

Anakin could still feel the aftershocks of the lighting through his muscles; it was a testament to Luke's strength and resiliency he was able to move after such a concentrated attack.

"My... son."

"Thank you."

Anakin struggled to breathe, and nodded, offering a faint half smile. He wanted to tell Luke how proud he was of him for everything. For doing what he'd been unable to do; for being the Jedi Anakin *should* have been.

But the words wouldn't come.

Luke smiled back and then it disappeared as he looked around, his gaze going back to the viewport. "We need to get out of here. Can you move?"

“With... your... help.”

“Come on then,” Luke pushed to his feet and slung Anakin’s arm around his shoulder. “Ready?”

Saving his breath to breathe, Anakin nodded. Slowly, Luke got him to his feet. The world spun, darkness edging his vision again, as something inside his body tore loose, a physical tearing from the lightning damage. He said nothing; he was dying but he didn’t intend to die where he’d killed the Sith who’d held him in thrall for over two decades..

Slowly, they made their way out of the Emperor’s throne room, Anakin directing Luke with shaky hand gestures when he paused for a direction. It was painful and agonizing, the trip to the deck, each step feeling as if it were a million.

The Force swirled about him for the first time in over a decade, pure and good, not tainted by anger or fear; it was a proverbial breath of fresh air. Drawing on it, he bolstered his strength to help his son, knowing Luke would never leave him behind.

They made the flight deck to find the same chaos the rest of the Death Star appeared to be in. Anakin’s steps faltered as they neared the Lambda class shuttle that had brought them to the space station in the first place.

“Just a little father, father,” Luke urged, helping him up the ramp and into the ship as his feet seemed to want to slip out from under him. “I’m not leaving you here.”

Anakin nodded, gasping for air as he was practically dragged into the shuttle and settled in the copilot’s chair. Luke was quick to take the pilot’s chair, not bothering with crash webbing as he spun up the engines and got it flying. They escaped the hangar just before it exploded, and Anakin’s pride in his son swelled, even as his lungs continued to liquify in his chest.

It wouldn’t be long now, but it didn’t matter; his son was everything Anakin had ever hoped him to be and he couldn’t be more proud.

“Father?”

“Here.” He gasped on the word, wheezing badly. “I’m... dying... Luke.”

Luke set the controls on autopilot as it veered towards the forest moon. “Father—”

“It’s... alright.”

“Not yet, father; please. Leia’s on that moon. My *sister*—”

“I... know.”

“We won’t be long, please hold on.”

“I.. will... try.”

Each word was like a thousand vibroknives in his chest, but Anakin was determined to do as he promised. He focused on the Force around him and pulled on it again to bolster his strength. It wouldn’t last long, but perhaps... perhaps long enough to reach the moon. Closing his eyes, he focused on breathing and ignoring the physical damage that was slowly killing him. He bolstered his heart and lungs, keeping the fluids away through sheer force of will; it

was a stop gap measure, but Anakin was determined to meet his daughter before he passed into the cosmic Force.

Leia saw the Death Star explode and *knew* Luke had made it off alive.

After informing Han that he was her brother and commandeering a speeder bike, she set out quickly for his location. Driven by an urgency she didn't fully understand, Leia tracked the descending shuttle, one eye on its descent, the other on her surroundings as the bike sped through the jungle. Had Luke been injured? What she was feeling wasn't fully her own and she couldn't make head nor tails of it, only that it was imperative that she be there when the shuttle landed.

Almost ten minutes later she was breaking to a stop in a clearing as the shuttle was folding its wings to land. Hopping off the speeder bike, she walked swiftly towards the loading bay door as it hissed, breaking the seal and began to lower.

"Leia!"

"Luke!" his call from within the shuttle had her breaking into a run at the urgency in his voice. "Are you alright?"

He didn't answer.

Speeding up the ramp into the ship, she didn't find him in the main compartment but saw him kneeling beside the copilot chair in the cockpit. Tears streaked his face, tears she could see even from a distance. "Luke!"

"I did it, Leia." He turned his gaze towards her, the same sadness she'd sensed in him before clear in the depth of his eyes and the lines of his face. "I did it. I *saved* him."

"You..." she stepped into the cockpit and hesitated, seeing that Luke grasped the hand of another; someone who was sitting in the chair. She swallowed hard, knowing what she was going to find; knowing that *Vader* sat in the chair.

Her... *their* Father.

The same man who had tortured her on the Death Star years ago without a single sign of recognition; the same man who had stood by and held her still as Grand Moff Tarkin ordered the destruction of her adopted home. Her adopted *family*. The only parents she'd ever known had been killed in the attack, leaving her an orphan twice over — or so she'd thought.

Since Luke had dropped the bomb that Vader was his father, her world had been tilted on its axis. Even more so when Luke had confirmed what she'd long suspected; long *known* — Luke was her *brother*.

And the man who had cause so much destruction and brought so much despair to the galaxy, had given them both life.

She'd spent a good deal of time and sleepless nights thinking about it and what she was going to do if she ever met him again. Now that the moment was upon her, it was not what she expected.

Luke extended his hand to her and motioned her over. “Quickly; he doesn’t have much time.”

Leia exhaled and stepped forward, taking Luke’s hand and turning her gaze to the man in the copilot chair.

Vader... wasn’t Vader. His flesh was red, burned and blistered as if he’d strode through the gates of hell. His hair was singed, burned almost completely away, some of the flesh melted clear through to the bone of his skull. But it was his *eyes* that held her. Eyes that held recognition, sorrow and remorse — eyes that were *not* those of the monster she’d met before.

These eyes were ice blue and sunken into his skull, glowing with a pride and love she had only ever see on her adopted parent’s faces before.

This then was not Vader, but Anakin Skywalker — the father Luke had been so desperate to save.

“Leia...” Anakin gasped. “Our... Leia.”

Luke squeezed her hand and then, to her surprise, shifted, drawing her down with him so they were both kneeling beside their father. Luke folded her hand about his where it held their father’s hand and squeezed, adjusting his grip so they were both holding Anakin’s hand. Luke then put his arm about her shoulders, presenting a solid united front. “This is our father, Leia; Anakin Skywalker.”

Anakin chuckled and then coughed weakly. “She knows... Luke.” He wheezed in a breath that made her wince and cringe inwardly; he was clearly dying. How he was still alive, she didn’t know. ‘He was right... about me, Leia.’ gasping for breath between words, Anakin struggled to get the words out. “And I... was right... about *you*.”

She blinked, not expecting that. “About... me?”

“I met you... once... on Alderaan. You were... two... and said... you were... three.”

The memory was faded and fuzzy, dismissed until this moment as the dreams of a child. A meeting, like so many other meetings, between Bail and his guests. But this one had Anakin Skywalker’s face, charm dripping from his words meant to enthrall and tease. “*It was a pleasure, Leia. I’m sure you’ll grow up to be just as feisty as your mother.*”

Giving her head a slight shake, she refocused on Anakin’s and saw a deep remorse in his gaze.

“You’re just... like her. Just as... beautiful and... feisty.” Anakin coughed. “I’m sorry... Leia.”

“For what?” His apology caught her off guard. Vader had *never* apologized to anyone for anything. Luke squeezed her shoulders, as if sensing her confusion and trying to reassure her — which he probably did and probably was.

“For Alderaan.” Anakin wheezed. “For not... recognizing you... then and... taking you... back to... your mother.”

“To my...” Leia glanced at Luke to find his eyes as wide as hers. “I don’t understand.”

“So *close*...” Anakin coughed, his hand trembling in theirs, gripping almost painfully tight. ‘I was... so close... and I didn’t... *see*.’ he coughed again, blood flecking his lips as tears slid down his cheeks. “I’m sorry... Padmé... *so* sorry...”

“Padmé?”

Leia swallowed hard; she’d heard that name. Bail had told her about her adopted mother before she’d made her choice to join the Senate as his aid. He’d wanted her to understand and had tried to dissuade her from the course as her birth mother had wanted *more* for her. Leia hadn’t been dissuaded once she’d learned Padmé had been a senator herself; it had simply solidified her outlook and the path she’d chosen to take. “Our mother.”

Luke’s arm jerked around her shoulders, but Leia focused on Anakin. “What do you mean you didn’t see? That you didn’t bring me to her.”

“She was... waiting for me... on the ship... after I saw you.” Anakin’s hand squeezed impossibly hard in theirs, making her fingers numb. “We were... searching for...” he wheezed, “you both... I’m sorry... I couldn’t...” a cough broke his words, making them difficult to follow. “find you... sooner. You weren’t... together. You *should*... have been... *together*...”

And then Leia understood.

Vader hadn’t recognized her at the meeting because she’d told him she was the wrong age and she was a single child. He’d been searching for them. Their *mother* had been searching for them — with him. And they’d been assumed to be growing up together. “Father,” she slid her hand across his wrist, noticing for the first time that tears were sliding down her cheeks as well. “I have had a happy life; you did not fail me.”

“I failed... *her*.”

“No,” Luke chimed in, his voice thick. “No you didn’t. We’re here. We’re together now. *You* did that.”

“But she... is not.”

Luke smiled, tilting his head to Leia’s even as his own tears ran in silent streams down his cheeks. “Yes she is. She’s a part of us. A part of the Force. She’s right here with us... and she’s waiting for you.”

“Luke—” Leia shot him an alarmed glance.

He smiled sadly, catching her gaze with a short shake of his head before addressing Anakin again. “She brought us back together, father; I *know* it.”

“She was... right...” Anakin smiled, coughing and more blood flecked his lips as a slight gurgle entered his words. “You found... me. Both of... you. You... saved me.”

“Go to her, father,” Luke told Anakin thickly. “She’s waited a long time for you to join her.”

“Luke!” Leia cringed, watching Anakin.

Anakin to her surprise, smiled even wider, revealing bloody teeth and gums. "It's alright... Leia. He is... right. I am..." he struggled to continue talking through a coughing spree, his words becoming faint as the gurgle intensified. 'We are... so proud... of you... both.' Anakin sucked in a sharp breath and then seemed to deflate, sliding back into the seat, his eyes closing, "May the..." his voice ebbed away as the air left his lungs and his lips could no longer form the words. "Force be..."

A soft hiss escaped his lips and then there was silence, his hand going slack in theirs.

"With you," Luke finished softly, choking on the words.

Leia turned her face to Luke's shoulder, feeling the sudden and devastating loss of something she's only just found and hadn't the chance to truly appreciate. Luke seemed unable to finish the phrase, so she did it for him, whispering against his neck as she did. "Always."

Anakin's grip slacked and disappeared as it slipped from theirs. Luke turned then, clutching her in a tight embrace as tears soaked her shoulder, his chest and shoulders heaving in silent sobs for the man who had helped give them life. For the man who had been their father and all, she realized with a suddenly revelation, that he had lost.

Holding him, Leia's own tears fell, but she didn't sob. Her chest was tight as she held her grieving brother. Anakin Skywalker had been a deeply flawed man... a man of great emotions and, in the end, it had been the love of his *son* who had rescued him.

They sat there, holding one another, for so long that it wasn't until Luke's sobs finally ebbed and his tears stopped, that she realized she couldn't feel her knees. Not that she cared. She'd have stayed there for him

Luke raised his head, his eyes red and puffy, sorrowful but not grief-stricken. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Being here."

"You needed me," she returned seriously, searching his gaze. "Where else would I be?"

"I wasn't sure you'd come after everything he'd done."

"You're my *brother*, Luke," Leia told him softly, squeezing his shoulders as she took them in her hands. "And he was our father; Anakin Skywalker. We were given a chance to glimpse the man he once was; a rare and precious gift. I'm *glad* I came."

Luke nodded, glanced at the chair and then swallowed hard. "We should burn his body; lay him to rest."

Silently, she agreed with a nod, knowing he needed this and, as she stood, realized that a part of her needed this too. It would bring closure to two parts of her history that had been in conflict since Luke had told her of their true parentage.

Without a word, they left the shuttle. Working together in silence, they found a downed tree and set to work clearing the forest away from it. Building it up with deadwood, they created a platform that would hold Anakin's body. Around the pyre, they stacked bundles of

wood, packing it together and soaking it in fuel to ensure it would burn long and hot. More wood was stacked to the side just in case they needed to feed the pyre once it was lit.

Once they had enough wood, Luke led the way back into the shuttle and, together, they lifted Anakin's body from the chair where he'd passed on and carried him out of the shuttle. It was slow going, but they took their time and, once they were at the Pyre, Luke used the Force to lift Anakin's body into place.

In silence, they stared at their creation as twilight descended around them. Time passed slowly as they stood, his arm around her shoulders and hers around his waist, silently waiting for the right moment.

Night fell before they stirred, the stars appearing in the sky above, a shooting star drawing their gazes heavenwards.

It was time.

Off to the side, Luke had placed a branch with a fuel soaked rag. He called it to him with a wave of his hand, catching it easily. Holding it out before him, Leia took the cue and lit the branch. Their eyes met and Leia place her hand on the stick just below his, understanding his offer. Together, they stepped forward as one and lit the pyre, saying goodbye to the Father they'd known only briefly, together.

The whoosh of the fuel as it caught fire was audible, forcing them back as the flames raced along the imbued wood and across Anakin's body. Heat forced them back yet more steps as the pyre went up, lighting the darkened forest clearing as if it was daylight.

And so Anakin Skywalker's mortal remains were consigned back to the cosmic Force and the ethereal arms of his love.

"Ani."

The voice teased the edges of his senses, familiar and beloved, but he knew it to be a trick. She'd died long, long ago.

Her laughter suddenly surrounded him.

"You're right; I did. Open your eyes, my love."

His eyes snapped open... and there she was. Just as he remembered her. No sign of the damage that had taken her from him; she was beautiful and *whole*.

"Padmé!"

She was in his arms then, holding him close.

"I've missed you, Anakin."

"I've missed you too, Angel. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry — for everything."

"No," she shook her head, and it was only then he realized he could see through her; see through his own body. "You kept your promise; you found them, Ani."

“Too late to save you.”

“But not too late to save yourself.” Her hands touched his face, her smile brilliant and *proud*. “You saved Luke and he, in turn, saved you.”

“He almost didn’t.”

“Almost doesn’t count, only what is.” her tone was teasing, “Do or do not, there is no try...” her expression then softened, practically glowing with pride, “and Luke *did*.”

“So he did.” Anakin laughed, the sound echoing around them. “Our children are amazing; I’m sorry I could never find them for you.”

“No regrets, Ani.” Padmé shook her head. “I’ve been watching our children for a long time and I’m as proud of them as I know you are. They grew up where they needed to be to become the people they are now.”

“I’ve missed you. So... so much!” He wrapped himself around her tightly. “I’m never letting you go again, Padmé. I love you; I’ve *always* loved you.”

“And I love you, Anakin Skywalker.” Her smile was brilliant before it melted away, her voice becoming disembodied as their essences merged and became one, uniting in the cosmic Force for eternity. “Welcome home.”

Fin

Author’s Note: And that’s it folks; thank you to everyone who has stuck around from the start, to those who have joined at some point or another.

I know the story was dark, I know it was difficult to read at time and I know there was a lot of speculation about where it was going and what would happen — or if it would ever end. Thank you for your patience and understanding over these last years — they have not been easy on me and major life changes and tragedies put this story’s completion in jeopardy more than once. I’m happy to say it didn’t kill it, though, and am proud of having finally completed it despite everything.

This story wouldn’t have been possible without the guidance and story idea, plot points and direction that Daenarraah gave at it’s creation; a big thank you to her for the plot bunny, her input and, in places, the scenes she envisioned as a part of the story. This plot bunny was far more rabid and monstrous than I ever thought it would be.

Thank you for all of your comments and most of all, your time and commitment to this story. Thank you for reading.

May the Force be with you.

—Jade_Max